

THE
ROMANCE
of a
COUNTRY
By M.A. CURTOIS.



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THE ROMANCE OF A COUNTRY

VOL. II.

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The Romance of a Country

A Masque

BY

M. A. CURTOIS

AUTHOR OF 'JENNY,' 'TRACKED,' 'MY BEST PUPIL,' ETC.

Laszt uns auch so ein Schauspiel geben !
Greift nur hinein ins volle Menschenleben !

They seek a country.

VOLUME II.

LONDON

T. FISHER UNWIN
PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1893

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THE COUNTRY IS FOUND

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THE COUNTRY IS FOUND

THE SENTENCE.

Was er schreibt ist Blut.

Presented to the
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1893
The Romance of a Country.

I.

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly ; but it lies
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows.

THE White Time had passed ; the blossoms had fallen in white showers from the trees, and the Fair Country no longer wore her bridal raiment. But the bridegrooms lingered, although a golden summer poured daily beauty upon the meadows of the Alidrah.

Beautiful meadows ! lying now beneath the sun, deep-coloured beneath a sky of deepest blue, their grass scarcely visible amidst the waves of colours—yellow, blue, red—in which the flowers decked themselves. Lazy streams wandered slowly through the meadows, trees bent over them, cattle pastured quietly ; there was no sign that either grass or

flowers lay already beneath the tread of an invader. And if the meadows were peaceful, the lakes were brilliant, sparkling into vivid green or shining blue, catching the light even in the early morning when the rocks were purple against skies pale with dawn. And in the streets was the hum of men and commerce, and the palaces of the Estria were magnificent with marble, and misty morning light shone on quiet cities, lying on valleys and slopes, with grey hills watching over them. All was fair as during the countless golden summers when men praised the Good Spirits who loved the Alidrah. And yet—not far away—upon each side of the Plain two armies paused before they rose to destroy the land. None knew why they lingered; and the sense of continual dread hovered poisonously on the meadows and the flowers.

With this dread on us we will leave the Fair Country to its blue skies and lazy, murmuring streams; and, travelling out on to the barren hills, will follow the wandering steps of one we know. Their mission is personal, private, and yet in its privacy touching the threads from which nations dooms are woven. For, as the three captives pine in Ursan's dungeon, other fates than their own are being involved with them.

I I.

So fair her brow, so smooth her hand,
So soft her glance, so bright her tress,
Her bondage could not press the brand
Of chains upon her loveliness ;
But the light thoughts that none can bind,
The careless heart, the spirit free,
These seek for only in the mind
That knows no life save liberty.

ERED was alone—alone upon the hills which surged on all sides of her towards the sky, not large or mountainous, but tossed like waves, as if under some spell which had arrested them in movement. Since the moonlit night when she had fled from the Escola, with Olbri's voice in her ears, and his jewels at her breast, no human presence or sound of human voice had ever been near her in the loneliness. It even seemed to her as if her wandering footsteps went through the midst of a solitary world, where the wrath of the gods condemned her to wander always, and never to hear a human voice again. And still, deserted, solitary, unprotected, forsaken by Heaven, unfit to

guard herself, she went on steadily, with the jewels at her heart which might yet rescue Ascar from his enemies. The hills were black in the night as the stars came out above her ; in the early morning there were strange colours to be seen ; at midday, when the sun's blaze was on the barrenness, she sought some hollow where she could rest or sleep. Now and then she started, crying out with terror, from some dream that she was led to sacrifice ; now and then, as she walked, the hills became alive with the lights and tumult of the wedding-feast. But more often she went on without thinking, steadily, conscious of the curse of the gods, of her loneliness, but still more of the steadfast purpose in her mind that she would save Ascar from his enemies. Her old slave-dreams, her visions of an unknown country, were far away now, like half-forgotten phantoms ; her sense of punishment lay silently upon her, the loneliness enclosed her, and she went on through it. She had worn out her sandals, and her feet were bare beneath the rough, grey, slave's garment which she wore, and the grey strip or veil, known as 'slave's covering,' which concealed her bright hair, and the jewels on her breast. From the court of the Escola she had snatched a wallet of provisions—a scanty store which was lessening day by day—but she had not been able to follow Olbri's counsel, and had no weapon to protect her womanhood. She went northwards;

as well as her ignorance could judge, expecting always to find some traveller who would direct her to the camp of Ursan or of Alvo, for in either camp Ascar might be a prisoner. If she could not reach him—if her store of provisions wasted, and she must lie down in the loneliness and die—she had still one hope, for she had heard that a dying prayer has power to pierce to the Great Spirit through the Silence. Often she fancied herself lying down for the last time, pouring out her soul in one final prayer for Ascar—often as condemned and dying in his stead, offering her delicate throat for sacrifice. She must be strong . . . or, at least, even through her fears, she must pour out her life or death for Ascar's sake ; it was only now and again that there rose another cry, 'Let me be his wife ! Let me be the mother of his children !'

The sensation of dreaming increased as days went on, increasing with physical pain and weariness. The black hills were a vast, silent gulf around her, themselves enclosed by the wide-stretching, silent sky. . . .

It was at this time that a little band of Karngria, who had been sent out on an expedition of a few days from Alvo's camp, found a poor woman lying exhausted on the ground, with a rough veil wrapped round her, and an empty wallet by her side. Not a word could she utter which they

could understand, save the word 'Alvo,' which she cried out repeatedly; but that name placed her under the protection of a leader who never permitted a woman to be injured. The Karngria consulted, and some of the rougher spirits were little disposed to treat their prey with gentleness, but even on the roughest the fear of Alvo rested, and they dared not venture to set his commands aside. They determined, at last, to take the woman with them, and give her uninjured into the young leader's hands. And that their intention might be fulfilled without delay, they set out forthwith on their return to Alvo's camp.

I I I.

His schemes of war were sudden, unforeseen,
Inexplicable both to friend and foe ;
It seemed as if some momentary spleen
Inspired the project, and impelled the blow ;
And most his fortune and success were seen
With means the most inadequate and low ;
Most master of himself, and least encumbered,
When overmatched, entangled and outnumbered.

IT chanced that they reached it upon a memorable day, a day that had been long foreseen by the wiser spirits in the camp, aware that the iron rule by which Alvo maintained his power could not long crush revolt if the army were left idle. The tumultuous elements which the young leader governed might indeed have taxed greater experience than his own, and possibly greater wisdom might have been unequal to the task without the singular combination of qualities which he possessed. His innate love of order, his personal fascination, the capriciousness which made his deeds and words uncertain, not only kept the camp quiet but amused it, veiling the real power by which he governed. But the task

was a heavy one, and the young chief of the exiles, hated as the son of the Alidrah and the favourite of Ursan, surrounded by enemies and conspirators, not knowing what tidings might come from Ursan's camp, suffering continually from physical exhaustion, needed all his genius to support him in his trials. It was not to such days that he had looked forward when he entered on the agreement which made him Ursan's son.

And now at least one blow had fallen, for he was privately informed that the Gortona would revolt before the day was over, that they would openly shake off his authority, and call on the rest of the camp to follow them. The informers were—strange to say!—the two rebellious Gortona leaders, who had duly been brought to Alvo's tent, and who had been so much amazed by the leader's graciousness that their gratitude induced this present information. Alvo received the news quietly, commended their faithfulness, and then dismissed them, after enjoining strictest silence. There was no need for him to make special preparation, for he was always prepared for rebellion in the camp. He did not even send for Osmyn, for it was in his disposition to keep the most pressing anxieties to himself.

Yet, when that morning he stood amongst the Rema leaders, he could not so far command himself as to appear entirely as usual; and his wan, abstracted looks served to reveal how much even

his beauty owed to its animation. They stood in a group outside his tent, on which the gold spear was glittering, for the sun had come out again after an interval of rain, though the clouds were still low on the hills behind the camp, and broken mists rested on the hillsides like scattered foam. Alvo was answering questions readily, although mechanically and as if he were in a dream, when a touch on his arm made him start as he turned round, expecting the tidings for which he had been waiting all the morning. But it was a Karngri soldier who had come to announce that a woman who asked for him had been brought into the camp.

A woman! It is certain that at this particular moment the young leader was in no humour for another trial, and experience had convinced him of the wisdom of the law by which he had forbidden the presence of women in the camp. Yet at this instant, full of anxiety, an old memory touched him unexpectedly, whispering that his load of perplexity and danger might now be lightened by the arrival of a friend. His eyes became brighter, he signed to the Karngria to approach, and the Rema leaders looked at him curiously.

The band of Karngria drew near. As it opened, it could be seen that in the centre of the men was a woman's figure, bare-footed, and in grey, rough slave's attire, yet not with the ordinary aspect of a slave. The veil had fallen from her head on to her

shoulders, and disclosed her gleaming hair, her sunken face, and frightened eyes; her nervous hands grasped the grey folds upon her breast; and a slight but visible tremor shook her knees. With the first glance Alvo's dream was dissipated, but it was replaced by a sensation of compassion; for the young leader, in spite of his own cares and ambition, had always some pity to spare for those in trouble. With some faint amusement, as well as interest, he observed the efforts which were being made by one of the Karngria, who had joined the band in its passage through the camp, and had discovered that the captive spoke the language of the Alidrah.

'See!' cried the Karngri, 'there is no need to be afraid. Here are many leaders who are all willing to protect thee. Choose one from the number, and kneel down to him.'

His speech was not altogether free from malice, for the Karngria bore little love to Rema leaders.

Ered raised her eyes. During her few days with the Karngria the poor slave, who during her slave-life had scarcely spoken to a man, had suffered agonies of terror and discomfort, and now looked, almost in despair, for a protector. She saw all round her the features of the Rema, and shrinking from them with instinctive antipathy, she turned to the only face which was different from the others. As she knelt down Alvo smiled.

‘A woman chooses a pretty face,’ muttered the oldest Rema leader.

The smile of Alvo became somewhat more developed.

‘Rise,’ he said, however, with a leader’s stateliness. ‘Thou hast not chosen amiss, for I am master here. Stand up in front of me. What wouldst thou ask?’

He spoke with much more formality than usual ; but he was not accustomed to women as to men.

Ered stood before him. The grey strip which was cloak and veil was disturbed by her movement and fell down to her feet ; it clung round them and round the bare, slender ankles which no longer wore the steel rings of a slave. Her beautiful, uncovered hair fell to her knees, her crossed hands clung to her breast, her head bent in slave’s attitude ; her low voice trembled, but it was audible, and its tone of supplication was pathetic. At the moment, intent upon the expression of her errand, she did not wait to discover who it was that she addressed.

‘I ask for protection,’ her terror prompted the first words. ‘I have come to entreat for my husband’s life.’

‘Thy husband’s life?’

‘He is a nobleman of the Fair Country. He was taken captive on our wedding-night.

‘Thy wedding-night? It is a sorrowful tale. If

I remember rightly I have heard of thee before— But I know nothing of thy husband. Still, I will listen to thy story, and then decide if any help is possible.’ He turned to the Rema leaders—‘Ah, pardon me this time. I will not forget your counsel.’

As he spoke, his face was lighted with its accustomed playfulness, and a sudden conviction shot into Ered’s mind. This must be the young leader, the master-fiend of fiends. A shudder chilled her, as if she had touched a snake.

Alvo was turning to her when once more his arm was touched, this time by one of the lowest camp-followers, for there were several escaped slaves within the camp who performed various offices of servitude. The man’s whisper was short. Alvo’s quick ear caught it at once. He turned with unruffled brow to the Rema leaders.

‘My presence seems required,’ he said. ‘We will meet to-morrow at this time.’

He saluted them with a mixture of archness and dignity. Then he addressed the Karngria,—

‘Take the woman to my tent, and give her food. Let one or two watch her until my return.’

He spoke to them in their own language as he had spoken to the Rema, and Ered was not able to understand his words. With a sinking heart she found herself led away. Alvo remained alone with the slave before his tent.

Then he only paused to hear the expected tid-

ings, which were brief, and in some measure less alarming than he expected. A band of fifty Gortona had set up the standard of revolt, and had taken up their station with their champion at the back of the camp. One of their chiefs had entreated them to send messengers to Alvo, but they had refused to listen to his words. In spite of their insignificance they were bold and confident, declaring that before long they would be joined by many others. The rebellion was a small one, but, like a fluttering spark, it might do damage before the day was over. Still, it was but a small one, and the young leader's eager spirit rose at once to a sudden, wild determination.

‘I will go to them,’ he cried.

‘*Thou*, Maravel?’

‘It will be best. I may induce them to return to their tents at once. Stay here and wait for me.’

He turned hastily away, whilst the slave looked after him with a strange expression.

‘He trusts to his devils,’ he muttered, ‘but they may not always save him.’

And, slave-like, he bent his head and raised his ear. Alvo, meanwhile, alone, almost unarmed, stood with bright eyes in the presence of the rebels.

It was a strange scene in his well-ordered camp, even in this comparatively deserted nook—a mound in the north-western corner, with a ravine on one

side of it and a great hill rising behind precipitously. Evidently the fifty Gortona were not entirely confident, or they would have raised their standard in the centre of the camp ; but they had placed it on the mound, had arranged themselves in ranks, and presented a warlike and regular appearance, though one of their leaders, who seemed dissatisfied, was standing apart, speaking to them earnestly. At sight of Alvo there was a moment's silence, so intense that not a man present seemed to breathe. Then, as if with an involuntary movement, the ranks of the Gortona opened, and Alvo passed with a confident step into the midst. In another instant he found himself upon the mound, surrounded by enemies, and in the presence of the champion.

A giant champion ! From out of the bands of the Gortona the tallest and broadest man had apparently been chosen. He stood there like a tower, grasping a great club in his hand, in an attitude at once secure and menacing. His hair was adorned with feathers and shells, after the fashion of his savage tribe ; he had no armour, but on his short blue cloak he had fastened the gold clasp by which leaders are distinguished. Obviously, from his brutal aspect, he was not to be won by reason, and it was evident that he was not afraid of force. The eyes of the Gortona were fixed with one consent upon the giant and the slender Marvel.

‘How darest thou stand before me?’ Alvo cried, indignantly. ‘Who permits thee to call thyself a Maravel? Take off that clasp.’

He advanced upon the giant, not expecting even then to encounter physical resistance. But the giant had been primed with liquor, and was not in a condition to be alarmed even by the renown of the young leader. His brutal cunning sufficed to keep him still until Alvo was close, when he suddenly rushed upon him. The attack was sudden, but it might have been resisted if the ground had not been slippery from heavy rain. Alvo shook himself free in an instant from the grasp upon his shoulder, but in the same moment his foot slipped, and he fell. The Gortona held their breath; but, with the rapidity of lightning, the young leader was on his feet again, his sword flashing out as he drew it rapidly and placed himself in a position not of defence, but of attack. He held it in his left hand, for he had fallen heavily, and his right arm hung useless by his side.

‘Let thy club fall,’ Alvo cried. ‘Take off thy clasp. Own that thou art conquered, or in an instant thou wilt be dead.’

The giant was stupefied. For a single triumphant moment it had seemed to him that he gained a victory, and now his antagonist stood before him with bright weapon, burning eyes, the appearance rather of a spirit than a man. For one instant he

hesitated, but, at a movement of Alvo's hand, sudden fear overcame him, and he let his club fall to the ground. An exclamation broke from the Gortona. He tore the clasp from his breast, and flung it at Alvo's feet.

'Take all, Maravel,' he cried. 'The devils help thee. Now, kill me, and pour out my blood to thy evil spirits.'

But Alvo stood still, looking at him steadily.

'Stand there,' he said. He turned round to the Gortona. 'I have defeated your champion. Open your ranks and let me pass.'

For one instant they hesitated; but before the pause was perilous, there rose the voice of the leader who had not been standing with the rest.

'The Maravel tells the truth. He has won a victory. He is a brave fellow, and we must open our ranks to him.'

As he spoke they opened, and with an unhesitating step Alvo went through the rebels as he had done before. But it was not his intention to leave them; and, as soon as he had passed their ranks, he turned round, and stood before them, facing them. A crowd had collected by this time, but the young leader paid no heed; his eyes were on the fifty rebels as if he stood alone with them.

'Stand still,' he cried. 'Not a man must move till I have spoken. But first—' with a smile he signed to the leader who had helped him. 'My

arm is out of joint at the shoulder. Pull it straight.'

Many friends were near him by this time, but it was in his disposition to offer this service to an enemy. Some mingled feelings made the man's face turn crimson ; but he stepped forward, and did what was required. When he had completed his task, with the rough surgery of a soldier, he retreated quietly to his former place, whilst Alvo stood before the rebels with a pallid countenance, and lips so crushed on each other that they were almost invisible. His aspect was terrible, but in his heart he knew that he held his lips together lest he should break out into tears. The emotion, however, was quickly overcome, and, as soon as he felt that he could trust his voice, he spoke. He addressed the rebels, speaking eloquently, in the Rema language that all the camp might hear.

When he had done, having set forth with his usual clearness his own duties and those of the soldiers who followed him, he offered to pardon any who would obey his laws in future, leaving the discontented to return forthwith to the mountains. The fifty divided itself into the two bands which had composed it, twenty-nine belonging to one leader and nineteen to another ; the thirty preferred to stay, and for one instant it appeared as if the others would follow the example of their comrades. The leader, however, who had rendered help to

Alvo had been whispering with the chief men in his band, and now stepped forward, with a face pale but resolute, and spoke clearly, although with something of reluctance.

‘Maravel, I and my soldiers will depart.’

‘It is well,’ said Alvo, though a shadow crossed his face. ‘But keep your men still for a while, until I have chosen one of these to take the promise in the name of all the rest.’

His eyes surveyed the thirty. All at once his face became lighted, and he signed to the giant-champion who had been lingering in the background. The man came forward with a sullen terror, as if he expected to be put to death.

‘Stand before me,’ said Alvo.

With a rapid movement he drew the long knife which the giant had in his belt.

‘It is for thee to seal the promise in the name of all the others. And no promise may be broken that is sealed on each side with blood. Hold out thy arm.’

Still as if he were expecting death, the man held it out with a frightened, sullen movement. In an instant a streak of blood could be seen across his arm, and Alvo bent forward and put his lips to it.

As he raised his head his eyes looked at the giant with the smile which was never easy to resist.

‘Have I hurt thee?’ he asked. ‘Take thy blade back from me. Seal the promise on thy leader’s arm, and we will be faithful to each other.’

He held out his arm, conscious of an inward shudder, for even battles had not trained him to love the touch of steel. Others shuddered also with more reasonable terror as they saw the weapon in the hand of the leader's enemy.

In an instant the performance was over. Laughing, though his face was pale, Alvo raised his arm to the lips of the bewildered giant, tapped his big adversary good-humouredly on the shoulder, and turned for the first time to the throngs of soldiers. He was greeted with loudest applause, for the sight of his fantastic courage, of the readiness and grace which had not failed him through the scene, had won the hearts even of the Gortona soldiers, and for the moment he swayed the multitude. But Alvo had other thoughts; he desired to make immediate arrangement for the departure of the twenty rebels from his camp, and, in order to do so, he called on one side the leader on whose services he had more than once relied that day. The man came to him—a man unlike his countrymen, with a worn, irregular face, and earnest eyes. As Alvo looked into those eyes he was seized by an unusual impulse, and an appeal broke from him before he knew.

‘Ah, why dost thou leave me? Thou art worth many leaders. Stay in my camp, and I will do all I can for thee.’

The man returned his look with a passionate

expression, but there was no relaxing of resolution in his face.

‘Maravel,’ he muttered, ‘I could die for *thee*. But thou ledest thy men to death, and mine shall not follow them.’

Alvo had touched his arm, but dropped his hand as he heard the words, and turned away without attempting any answer. He moved amidst frantic applause, but from the expression of his face he did not appear to be in the least triumphant. With a motion of his hand he signed to Osmyn to follow him, saluted the army with his usual grace, and then retired. In a very short while all were once more round their tents; the twenty had departed, and the camp was quiet.

‘*After all, he was overthrown,*’ cried the oldest leader of the Rema.

He spoke to the youngest Rema leader, and his friend the Karngri prince.

‘Callest thou that an overthrow?’ answered the young Rema, scornfully. ‘If thou and I had been overthrown, we should not have risen to tell the tale.’

But the old leader only shook his head.

‘The time will come when he will not rise.’

Alvo, meanwhile, had retreated to his tent, where he submitted to the hands of Osmyn, who attended to him carefully, though with a countenance so grim that his young master dared not

speaking to him. His nurse's duty over, Osmyn continued in the tent, for the captive of the Karngria was brought before his master, and Alvo had imposed as a law upon himself that he would never be alone with any woman. The young leader reclined upon cushions, as one overcome with weariness; Ered, who had refused to be seated, stood with clasped hands in front of him; in the distance Osmyn leaned upon a spear, with the motionless aspect of a sentinel. Distant sounds penetrated from the camp, but they came faintly, and as if from far away. It is little wonder that to the maiden who was a bride, the whole scene seemed like a dream within a dream.

She spoke, but she had no power to weigh her words, so faint was she from the exhaustion of her journey—even the sound of her trembling voice seemed strange, and she heard it as if it did not belong to her. Once more she had let her veil fall from some woman's feeling that she would prefer to stand with uncovered face, so there was no shade upon her gleaming hair, on her thin features, and sad, earnest eyes. Alvo was attentive, saying very little, though helping her with a question now and then, himself tired and pale, and with a grave expression which only became gentle when he looked at her. In spite of the legends which clung about his name, Ered was conscious that she was not afraid, some instinct even in her inexperience served

to assure her that she was not in danger. And Alvo lay listening to the trembling voice—it was not often that he heard a woman speak.

When the voice was silent,—

‘Now listen to me,’ he said, speaking kindly, and looking at her with steady eyes; ‘I will do what I can for thee and for thy husband, although there is not much that I can do. If I judge rightly, thy husband is a captive, and has probably been taken to the Leopard’s Den; for it is to that dungeon that Ursan sends all prisoners who are of sufficient importance to be kept. Go there. Do not attempt to go to Ursan’s camp. No woman is safe in that place even for an instant. Go to the Leopard’s Den. I will give a ring to thee which will ensure thee a hearing from the Governor. If he tells thee that thy husband is there, then send word to him by Ursan that thou canst offer a ransom for thy husband. It may be that he will hear thee, and that thy husband will be freed, but in any case do not go to him thyself. Bury thy jewels somewhere in the ground, and let no human being but thyself know of the place. That is all—Nay, a long journey lies before thee, let me see if in any way I can lighten it.’

He paused.

‘The Gortona who leave the camp to-day are going as far as the mountains, for I am sending words to Ursan. I can trust one of the leaders—he shall

take care of thee until the mountains are reached, when thou must journey by thyself. Here is my ring. Wear it always on thy finger. It bears the names Ursan, Alvo. With its aid thou wilt be safe. It was given to me by the Maravel of the Rema after a day when I saved his life in battle.'

He sighed as he held out the ring—a ring which had one red stone on which strange figures and two names were engraved. Ered took it from him without a word of gratitude, for her calmness was over, and she trembled convulsively. The dread of the fresh wandering which was imposed upon her, her physical exhaustion, even her gratitude, oppressed her like burdens too heavy to be borne, and no words to express her thanks rose to her lips. Her eyes met those of Alvo, and suddenly he spoke as if the words came from him against his will.

'Thou sayest that the Gods are angry?'

Ered did not answer him, but for one long instant her eyes looked into his; a sorrowful glance, on each side given and received as if with some meeting of unspoken sympathy. And then a faint smile, its expression, rose in her eyes, and she stooped reverently, kissed his hand, and drew her veil. So strangers, meeting but for a single instant, touch as they pass upon the road of life. Alvo signed to Osmyn and whispered a few words; and taking the hand of Ered, Osmyn drew her from the tent.

Before long he returned. Alvo was still alone, leaning on his cushions with his left hand over his eyes, the thin, supple hand which had once fought for Ursan, as the long scar which marred it testified. He looked up as Osmyn entered, with a resolve upon his face, as if he had not been dreaming so much as meditating.

‘Osmyn, thou must leave the camp.’

‘I, Estri?’

Osmyn stood bewildered ; for, obedient as he was to the least wish of his master, he knew that he was needed every moment in the camp, and that no other Exile could supply his place. Alvo looked at him timidly, anxious to disarm resentment, though there was no resentment in the mind of his follower.

‘It is not that I do not want thee—but I have written to the Maravel. I have told him that this suspense must end at last. I may need all my friends, and Uldic and Ivlon are away. They may be in danger, I have no news from them. I think I could bear every peril—everything, if I had thee and my yellow-haired Ivlon at my side.’

Osmyn waited for directions, but Alvo for a while was silent—fatigued and a prey to long trains of ideas, which came together in his mind without confusion, as if they were able to make space for themselves. The deep blue-grey eyes, the worn face of the captive, the fantastic generosity which

had made him yield his ring, the outbreak of the morning and his own fool-hardiness, Ursan's face looking at him with unrelenting glance—these things united in an indescribable sensation, as if some great sea were rising close to him. He roused himself and gave money and directions, which Osmyn received patiently and quietly.

‘Return as soon as possible, Osmyn.’

‘I will do so, Estri.’

‘Osmyn, Osmyn, thou art always good to me!’

Osmyn did not answer, standing silent and upright, until after a while he spoke, and in his turn gave directions, for of all the soldiers who lived in Alvo's camp, there was not another who knew the camp so well. When he had spoken he knelt down before his master, and kissed respectfully the thin hand which he took; but he said no farewell and, without even a parting glance, left the tent in silence, upright and resolute. As he rode away in the midst of a band of Effar, the sky was red with storms, and thunder muttered amongst the hills, but his mind was bent upon the still more certain omens which presaged destruction to the master whom he loved. With red clouds in front of him, and thunder in his ears, he rode with his band of men from Alvo's camp. The Gortona, meanwhile, guarding Ered in their midst, were pursuing their separate way to the mountains and the Maravel.

IV.

Ueber allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh.

AND now . . . Ered raised her head. It was full of a bewilderment of motion, for although conscious that she was lying on a couch, she seemed to be still surrounded by the dark faces of the Gortona, whilst the horse on which she was bound stumbled on the mountain-paths. Where was she now? for fresh air breathed on her forehead, soft cushions were beneath her head, and soft coverings upon her, whilst at some little distance a clear voice was singing as if it were carolling to the free air like a bird. She was lying in the open air with green turf beneath her couch, the boughs of trees above, and flowers on all sides of her—for one moment she fancied that she had passed through death and had attained some heaven of the gods at last. But it was a girl's voice that sang, and the words that rose so clearly were in the language of the Alidrah.

Love has voice of softest tone ;
Hear him ! Hear him !
Love—no sooner seen than flown ;
Fear him ! Fear him !
Ah, so brief to last so long !
Ah, so frail to be so strong !
Much we learn, but suffer long
Near him, near him.

The singer came nearer—a young girl, tall and slender, with her hands full of the flowers and leaves which she kept on gathering—a girl fair and upright as the mountain-tribes, but with the gracefulness of the Alidrah. She had wound her long veil of dark blue round her waist, and, holding one end in front of her, kept on piling it with flowers ; she moved with the secure step of possession through the garden, which seemed to be on a green slope in the midst of mountains. All at once, with a youthful motion, she threw back her golden head and her voice rang out to the sky still more clearly than before. Ered watched her as in a dream, for her eyelids were still heavy from the days of fever whose oppression haunted her.

Love is caught in gilded chains ;
Free him ! Free him !
Bound or free, his strength remains ;
Flee him ! Flee him !
Ah, so weak, with shafts of death !
Ah, so sweet, with poisoned breath !
Would'st look on to life and death ?
See him ! See him !

The singer turned her face towards Ered ; and then, darting away in an instant, fled across the short grass to some distant figures, clasping her flowers, though the other end of her veil trailed after her, a long blue line on the grass. And now voices came near, but Ered's ears and eyes were heavy, and she was almost too weak to raise her head ; even when she found herself at length surrounded, and beneath the eyes of four women who looked at her. They seemed to be speaking in consoling tones ; but in the confusion and weakness of her mind, the suspicion of danger which had been bred by many dangers rose first, and she was not able to restrain it.

‘ Tell me who you are.’

The oldest answered gravely,—

‘ We are the daughters of the Governor of Neridah.’

So !—these were the Roses, the celebrated beauties who had been the pride and joy of the Fair Country, now hidden in the mountains, whilst in the distant Alidrah their father languished in danger of his life. Even Ered knew their story, though she could not answer them, could not thank them for their assurances of kindness and protection, so clouded was her mind with the dangerous narcotic which the Gortona had given her to relieve her fever. Days passed before all had returned—her long, painful mountain journey, her terror of

the dark faces of the Gortona soldiers, her increasing fever, the taste of the bitter draught, and the heavy sleep which fell on her like a weight. All was changed now ! For the first time in her life she found herself surrounded by women's tenderness.

A new experience ! Many strange thoughts rose in Ered as she lay helpless on her couch in the small apartment chosen for her, whilst one sister after another stole softly to her room, bearing flowers, sweet boughs, summer fruit, bread dipped in cream. Ered learned to know them—Arva, with dark velvet eyes, and a face full of a mother's tenderness ; Erva, the lovely bride-elect of Estri Envar, over whose delicate health her sisters watched with mournful care ; Ora, pale, strong, devoted to the worship of the gods ; and Ira, the golden-haired darling of the rest. Worn with wandering, conscious of sad eyes and sunken face, Ered felt like the spectre of a life amongst them all.

Yet she learned to love them, and, as day by day passed on, to become familiar with a home that seemed strange as Heaven itself—accustomed as she was only to a disorderly slave household, or to the poverty of the shepherd's hut. The sisters were motherless, their father was in danger, they were far from their country, and in perpetual peril ; and yet their lives remained ordered, beautiful, full of home comforts, love, and cheerfulness. They

could even find time for the sick in other homes, as they had found time to receive her from the soldiers ; and their manner to each other was bright with playfulness, in spite of the pressure of continual sorrow. No dark phantoms oppressed them, no curse of earth or Heaven, no loneliness forsaken by gods and men ; even fiercer trials might break upon their lives, and find them still brave and full of steadfastness. The dim yearnings, the remorse, the anguish of the slave remained hidden from them, like spectres half perceived ; as, too weak to speak, Ered lay amongst the flowers with vague dreams of her unknown country and of heaven. A vision of sunlight, flowers, and women's beauty—it remained with her afterwards, that glimpse of mountain-life.

And yet,—

And yet the most distinct remembrance was one that was touched with human interest, a glance at recesses that remained concealed even in lives free to air and light as these. For once, as Ered lay on her garden-couch, and the sisters reclined beside her on the grass, Ira, whose hands had been, as usual, full of flowers, let her garland fall, and took the hand of the invalid. Then suddenly she bent to the ring on the thin finger ; and cried out, before she had time to control herself,—

‘Thou hast known the young leader !’

Even as she said the words, a flush like the sun-

set dyed her delicate skin with crimson ; and, regardless of her flowers, seeking only to hide her face, she buried it on the knees of Erva, who was near her. The scene remained afterwards in Ered's mind—the garden on the mountain slope, with great rocks towering above it ; the delicate beauty of Erva, the golden head upon her knees, the anxious faces of the two older sisters, the flowers which had slipped from the knees of Ira to the ground. All was over in an instant—the sisters had known too many troubles to lose their composure for more than a passing moment ; and, whilst Ered murmured some word of Alvo's camp, they became calm as if they had not been agitated. But of all her memories of the mountain home, this one dwelt the oftenest with Ascar's bride. A faint reflection of the trouble at her heart had been found even there amongst the flowers.

The days passed onwards. As her strength slowly returned, she became anxious to proceed once more on her journey ; and, with wonted unselfishness, the sisters spent their time in endeavouring to find an escort for her. A message came at length from the leader of a mountain tribe, promising, although with some mystery, that on a certain night, and in a certain nook in the mountains, the woman who had Alvo's ring would find a friend. The promise came from a trusted counsellor, and the sisters could not advise Ered to resist ; nay,

even the mystery was not wonderful in those days of caution, when every word was weighed. If they were anxious, their anxiety could only show itself in added tenderness, in the little attentions, gestures and caresses, which make an atmosphere of enfolding womanhood. It was in those last days, lying in Arva's motherly arms, that Ered whispered some details of her life, and the sisters, gathered compassionately round her, heard at length the history of the wedding-night. Arva smiled at the name of Ascar, a smile as tender and interested as that of a mother who recalls a son, but she did not murmur to Ascar's bride that the young Estri had once seemed to admire the eldest of the Roses ; nor did Erva connect the unfamiliar name of Olbri with a poor, pale, wandering boy whom she had once pitied and assisted. Old slave superstitions, still clinging to Ered's heart, restrained her words, and she dared not tell the whole—dared not reveal her darkest fears and phantoms ; lest, by mentioning the Curse of the Gods, she should increase it. Still un-comforted, and wasted as the spectre of a maiden, she made the last preparations for her journey. From her wandering she would look back on the mountain home, and would think that her life had known one glimpse of heaven.

So passed the last days. When the last evening came, the sisters clung to her with tears and kisses, with tender assurances of their remembrance, and

faintly expressed hopes that they might meet again. They accompanied her to the commencement of the rocky path, and there for a while still kissed and clung to her, while she yielded mechanically to their embraces, or murmured some broken words of gratitude. It was a lovely evening, the rocks lay in evening glow ; and as, descending, she looked back up the path, she could still see the forms and faces of the sisters, leaning towards her, bathed in evening light. It was in that evening glow that she still saw them when the path turned and she looked back in vain.

And yet. . . . At that very moment, not far from the appointed place, there might have been seen a band of Rema soldiers, standing in the attitudes of men prepared to move, and talking restlessly, with irritation. They appeared to be engaged in some angry argument, which distorted their faces, and kept their hands on their weapons. One, who had more composure than the rest, was making efforts to pacify his countrymen.

‘I tell you,’ he said, ‘that we must wait for the darkness, and let alone this woman who has Ursa’s ring—little Naritah may take her to the Leopard’s Den where Naritah’s own husband is said to be a captive. What does it matter? We have these other women whom we are at last permitted to attack. When night has fallen, and we have reached the

Rose Garden we shall have prizes enough for Ursan's camp.'

As he spoke, evening glow still lay upon the mountains, though some of the peaks were already grey and purple. The tints paled, faded, the first stars rose in the sky, and the rocks became dark with the approach of night. With a stealthy motion the soldiers drew their weapons, and approaching each other, waited for the darkness. We will leave them to their congenial task, and learn its issue in the camp of the Maravel.

V.

Denn was er blickt ist Schrecken, und was er sinnt ist Wuth ;
Und was er spricht ist Geiszel, und was er schreibt ist Blut.

MANY days have passed since we saw Ursan's camp, but to all outward appearance it remains the same—the camp by the Varidi, full of brawls and licence, of indescribable uproar, tumults, wickedness. The drinking-cups still clatter through the day as through the night, filled by the women who are there in numbers, dice are thrown, the most unspeakable songs are bawled, there are quarrels over plunder, over women, over wine, there are revels at noontide as if men imagined noon was midnight. And then, all at once, in the midst of some brawl or revel, some message from the Leader will be quietly reported, and, drunk or sober, the men whom it concerns will rise as quietly and go off to do his will. For, although to a stranger, and to many who are not strangers, this place may well seem like some infernal region, it has this of order in the midst of its confusion, that one influence is always para-

mount. The Rema soldiers may be false, licentious, cruel to captives, drunken, merciless, but there is not one among all their multitudes who would dispute the least wish of his commander. To one principle the Rema soldier holds :—‘The will of the Gods speaks through the Maravel.’

But when the will of the Gods is uttered through a human mouth it would seem to become liable to variations—to be clouded with the humours, perplexed with the ignorance, or saddened with the sorrow of its interpreter. And it is even possible that the demons’ will may, in its turn, encounter contradictions ; finding strange checks, unexpected barriers where it might have been supposed that its course was easiest. Was it possible that some secret unsuspected struggle had its lurking-place in the tent of the Maravel whilst the long summer passed, and day passing after day brought the army no nearer to the meadows of the Fair Country? Weary of inaction—for, in spite of expeditions, the life they led was in the main that of inaction—the soldiers of Ursan became restless, discontented, and yet dared not dispute the wisdom of their chief. The Maravel had his reasons, but the day would come at length when their torches would light the palaces of the Alidrah. With all their brutality this much of faithfulness was in the hearts of Rema soldiery.

And Ursan remained in his tent, and was scarcely

seen of man. It was always his whim to keep himself much alone, but this peculiarity, which had grown on him with years, had never been so evident before. Even Rudol seldom saw him, and gained few words when he did, whilst the Maravel issued few orders and paid little attention to his camp; his love for short slumbers and scanty food increasing so much meanwhile that he scarcely seemed to eat or sleep. Rudol waited uneasily, and in his deepest heart confessed that he did not understand his master's conduct. On this day, however, the day that we have reached, it was evident that at length a change had come. He could not but connect it with the arrival of the Gortona, who had brought to the camp the latest news from the young Leader.

In the evening he sought Ursan, fraught with some other tidings which he imagined might amuse the Maravel; and, as soon as he set foot in his master's tent, was relieved to recognise that the charge remained. Ursan sat as usual upon his bales of goods, beneath the lamp which was fastened to the pole, but he looked alert and wakeful, and the expression of his face was no longer careworn as it had been before. As Rudol came closer, however, he saw that this apparent cheerfulness was caused by the light in the eyes of the old Leader—the pale eyes, capable of a peculiar, inward light,

which could give them a terrible intensity. It had no beauty but power—the only beauty in the face or figure of the old Maravel.

‘Maravel Ursan!’ cried Rudol, ‘I have news! Thou hast heard of the daughters of the Governor of Neridah. Two of them are captives; they are at this moment in the camp, uninjured, because they made appeal to Alvo’s name. If thou dost not think it necessary *that* name should protect them, they may serve for an evening’s sport to all the camp.’

He looked timidly at Ursan, who drew together his thick eyebrows, but spoke with the softest modulations of his voice.

‘Ah! the pretty maidens—the pretty loves,’ he murmured — ‘Alvo’s friends, whom he possibly destines for his brides. Even I, with my wrinkles, must have a moment’s sight of those who can melt the snow on our little Alvo’s heart. Bring them to my tent. After I have received them there I will arrange a festival, in which all the camp shall share. And afterwards thou must summon these Gortona, for there is a message which I must send to-night. The letter of Alvo,’ he smiled, ‘is very pressing, and its answer must be forwarded without delay.’

‘To Alvo?’ muttered Rudol.

But Ursan started to his feet, and stood, a misshapen figure, upon and amidst his bales of goods.

‘Fool! To the Leopard’s Den.’

His voice filled the tent with thunder; and Rudol, in dismay, started backward to the entrance. But the wrath of the Maravel only lasted for an instant.

‘Bring the maidens.’

He smiled; and Rudol, trembling, agitated, scarcely daring to turn his mind to his dearest hope, left the tent of his master, glad to be released, that he might summon the captives to his master’s presence. The sight of those captives had filled the camp with excitement, but without Ursan’s permission none dared to injure them.

In a few moments they stood before Ursan—two unfortunate, helpless maidens, clinging to each other as those who are terrified, and yet with a dignity and modesty that even their helplessness could not take away. Torn from their home by the rough hands of Rema soldiers, ignorant of the fate of the two sisters who had escaped, appalled by the scenes of the camp they had passed through, it would have been only natural if they had been overwhelmed. But their love to each other seemed to support them even then, as they clung to each other before the Maravel; the taller and stronger form of the younger sister supporting the slighter figure of the elder. Round the white robe of Ora was the black scarf with golden figures, which proved that at the moment of her capture she had been

worshipping the gods ; but the blue veil with which Erva had tried to hide herself had been torn from her during her passage through the camp. Ursan looked from one to the other, from the pale beauty of the younger to the black silken hair, the delicate features of the other ; whilst both, with an agony of terror in their glance, kept their eyes fixed upon the Marvel. He sat amidst his bales of goods—his usual throne—and the lamp that was fixed to the pole shed light on him.

‘Welcome,’ said Ursan, and his tones of his strange voice were as caressing as the murmur of the wind ; ‘it is not often that this poor tent of mine has a chance of enclosing two such treasures. I hear that ye claim to be acquainted with my son, and that for his sake ye have asked for my protection.’

As he spoke, Erva let go of her sister, and came two steps closer to the feet of the Marvel.

‘We ask it, Marvel,’ she said, in the Rema tongue, to which her soft tones gave unusual sweetness, ‘because we are helpless, your captives, because as women we entreat you for mercy. We ask it also because we have powerful friends who will be able to repay any kindness you may show us. And if there is need for any other reason, we ask for protection because we have known your son. Show us the kindness of a leader—of a king—and allow us to depart uninjured from your camp. You will

not repent that you have been merciful, for some day you yourself may need mercy from the Gods.'

She spoke with the utmost timidity, and yet with the confidence of one who has been always accustomed to respect ; and, advancing still closer, with a timid motion she touched, with her clasped hands, the hand of the Maravel. The movement brought their faces close ; and Ursan suddenly advanced his own, his closed teeth grinning, and light breaking through his eyes.

'Ah, if I were younger !'

The girl drew back precipitately, quivering as if she had trodden on a serpent. Terrified, she fell back in her sister's arms, and with her face hidden, fell into frightened cries. Ora, still folding the sister whom she shielded, raised her face, that in her turn she might make appeal. Her voice was grave, steadfast ; if she felt any fear it could only be known by the pallor of her lips.

'Maravel, we ask for protection in the name of Estri Alvo.'

The light in the pale eyes of Ursan now spread over all his face.

'It is in his name I welcome you. Come closer, you Rema soldiers. I want you to take a message to the camp. Tell the camp that the Maravel has two presents to offer it, which he has not even kissed, that their value may be greater. Let them be guarded until the moon is high ; and then place

them in the centre of the camp, and let who will give chase. There will not be much to give to every soldier, but any one who chooses may have a little portion. In the names of the Maravel and Estri Alvo !’

The Rema soldiers advanced ; Erva broke away from her sister, and flung herself at Ursan’s knees, weeping passionately—she clasped his knees with her arms, and clung to them, pouring out entreaties in the name of *any one* he loved. Ursan spoke,—

‘I have granted thee this festival because thou hast appealed to the name of my fellow-leader. Drag her away.’

The soldiers seized the sisters, whose shrieks filled the tent as they struggled desperately, but grew fainter as they were dragged into the night, until at last they could only be heard as a faint sound in the distance. Ursan bent forward, listening, with a smile on his lips, which muttered : ‘In the names of the Maravel and Estri Alvo.’ Then he leaned back. He would yet delay a while before he signed the sentence—the sentence for the Leopard’s Den. Already he had inscribed the message on his tablets, but until night came he need not add his signature.

And, meanwhile, the sisters had been enclosed in a rude hovel, which occasionally served the purpose of a prison ; left alone, for their guards had

gone hastily away, declaring that the whole camp must be roused at once. In the dim light each could see the other's face, tear-swollen, pale as with the last agony, with dilated eyes, and lips trembling with the breath which heaved and sobbed as it found its way through them. Then Erva cried, clinging to her sister's arm, as if in that one support lay all her hope,—

‘Ora, pray to the Gods.’

Ora answered with a moan,—

‘It is dark—dark. They send no help.’

Leaving her sister, she sank down upon the ground, with her elbows on her knees and her face hidden in her hands—as if in that moment of supremest desolation she could only fall into the attitude of despair. Stronger in her faith than Estri Ascar's bride had been, she still tried to stretch her heart towards the gods, but a dark pall had intervened, and no sensation of their presence came to comfort her in this hour of agony. Erva stood by her, roused by her sister's anguish to such courage as she had never felt before. After all, life itself must in any case be dark to the maiden who had known Estri Envar's faithlessness.

Ora . . . we are alone . . . let us make one effort more . . . let us tear our way through this prison with our hands . . . let us find some weapon . . . after all, the Gods are good. . . .’ She repeated, sobbing, ‘After all, the Gods are good.’

As Ora raised from her hands a tearless face, the elder sister stole softly to the entrance. She laid her hand on the door—it gave way unexpectedly—it opened, and the night air rushed into the hovel. Marvel of marvels! By some extraordinary chance the soldiers of Ursan had not secured the entrance. In another instant, with suffocating heart-beats, the sisters found themselves standing in the night.

They looked round wildly. Upon all sides of them the lights of the camp twinkled brightly beneath the sky; there were stars above, on the right hand rose some rocks, the pale line of the Tordrade could be distinguished in the darkness. Their eyes met each other; clinging to each other's hands they rushed down the rocky path towards the river. They reached it; they stood on the brink, it seemed dark beneath the stars; they could see the dark mass of a boat close to the shore. With strangling pulses they drew near to enter it—when suddenly a man rose from it and stood before them. With a terrible reaction, a half-stifled shriek, Erva fell down on her knees before the man. He was a small, dark figure in the starlight; there was the handle of some great axe or hatchet in his hand.

‘Oh, save us! If in this horrible place of fiends there is any mercy, there is any pity left . . . if

you have pity . . . if the gods have not forsaken you—have mercy on two wretched women who have no other help but you. Let us cross the river ; or, if you dare not set us free, at least kill us, and save us from the soldiers. Think for yourself ! Can this camp be a place in which it is fit for us to pass the night ?’

‘ We have friends,’ Ora cried ; ‘ we shall be able to protect you—the Great Spirit, whose home is in the Silence, will protect you. Save my sister, and leave me for the soldiers—I shall not be afraid if I am sure that she is safe. I shall not even be ashamed—’

But Erva cried out wildly, declaring that each must have the same fate as the other. And Lipsus stood before the sisters in amazement, grasping his hatchet with both hands for support.

The night had grown black, and its darkness hid the stars ; a heavy wind rose, and brought some drops of rain ; and at the sound of their patter on the ground Erva started up, crying that the soldiers came. Frantic with terror, she flung out both arms wildly, as if she would cast herself into the river ; and Ora, in horror, seized her with her hands, while sobs that could be restrained no longer burst from both. Through the sound of their sobbing rose another voice.

‘ Ah, do not cry. Do not be frightened. I will help you.’

In that instant Lipsus had made up his mind,

For the sake of his pity he would brave the Maravel.

With rough, gentle movements he assisted Ora to lay her almost unconscious sister in the boat, murmuring that the boat was old and rotten, and that it would be well if they ever reached the other shore. Then, last of the three, he sat down in the boat himself, muttering to Ora, whose generosity would have stayed him, that he had already deserted his sentinel's duty, and that it did not now matter what became of him. He spoke as one in a dream, for indeed it seemed that only in a dream he disobeyed the Maravel. Low thunder echoed through the increasing darkness, as he raised his arm and pushed off from the shore. . . .

The camp knew the rest. Before the night was over, the party which had started in pursuit returned, dragging with them a miserable, half-drowned Lipsus, but not the two beautiful captives for whom all the camp had waited. Some mountaineers on the other side of the river had rescued the fugitives when their boat sank in the water; had revived them, and as soon as the fury of the storm was over, had promoted the escape of the women from the place. To Lipsus, still half-drowned, remained a memory that he had refused to forsake his duty any further—and something he remembered too of tears and kisses, but confusedly, as if he had been delirious. And now only half

sensible, himself a captive, bound hand and foot, he was borne to Ursan's camp. He could scarcely understand even the torrent of predictions of torture and death which his comrades held to him.

And now . . . all was over. With hands and feet still bound, he was left in the hut from which the sisters had escaped; he had heard the grating bolts which secured the entrance, and could distinguish the tread of sentinels. If he closed his eyes he was once more in the boat, black water below him, and pelting rain above; or, carried by his comrades through the fury of the camp, he could see grinning teeth, and hands thrust out to tear him. Strange! he felt no fear, even of those grinning teeth, or of the torture to which Ursan might condemn him—his only feeling was a reproachful sense that he deserved to be punished since he had not fulfilled his duty. With his hands round his knees, on which his sharp chin rested, with mournful desires for his hatchet, he sat waiting patiently. It was not for Ursan's soldier, all his life trained to obedience, to question the justice of the Maravel.

And meanwhile—the morning stole into Ursan's tent; yellow, faint through the tent's grey, shadowy coverings, not yet paling the lamp which hung in its usual place, casting light on the worn face of

the Marvel. Rudol was there, and it was from his lips that Ursan heard the story of the night.

He said a few words when it was finished.

‘Where is Lipsus?’

‘He is guarded. The camp wishes to tear him in pieces.’

‘Keep him, keep him. We may find a hostage useful.’ He added, after a pause, ‘He shall be sent to Alvo’s camp.’

And then again he fell into deepest silence; until, at last, stretching out his hand, he took up the message he had written. Rudol’s heart was beating; but, as far as possible, he strove to suppress all signs of agitation.

‘There are two prisoners?’

‘Two prisoners, Marvel.’

‘I shall keep one for a hostage. Which shall I choose for execution?’

Rudol’s heart was beating even faster than before, but he struggled to keep emotion from his voice.

‘The youngest . . . is the favourite.’

Ursan’s lips smiled quietly.

‘It shall be the youngest.’

Once more he took up his tablets, added a name to the message—and then paused. Glancing at him, Rudol observed with consternation that the Marvel was motionless and his face was ashen. But he only paused for a moment.

'I, Ursan, write this message.'

On the seal were the names of the leaders,
'Ursan—Alvo.'

Ursan signed to Rudol, and the soldiers entered. Without a word they received the tablets and retired. In a few instants, the message which the Maravel had written was on its way towards the Leopard's Den.

V I.

εἰς Ἀΐδου δόμους.

AND meanwhile, far from echoes of any outside world, the three captives of the Rema had languished in their dungeon, lost to sunlight, to fresh air, and to hope, lingering in darkness, as men only half alive. At first, when they had been enclosed in that living tomb, its black gulf had seemed to them unnatural; but, day by day—if they could count days in the darkness—it was strange to find themselves akin to it. Its dank stones, its faint gleams of light, its cold and silence, suited their low voices and dejected movements; they had lost the sunlight, and felt themselves out of touch with the free air and the common life of men. Ill fed, with clothes that did not protect them from the damp, worn with the exhaustion of the cruel march, it was only too easy to sink into apathy, and to hold little communion with each other. Yet, even in that mutual gloom, there were differences,

for no circumstances efface the distinctions of character.

Strange! of the three it was Ascar who suffered least—Ascar, who had been the weakest in the march—it was his disposition, thoughtful, if self-willed, which yielded most easily to captivity.

Left now at last to solitude and meditation, freed from the insults of the Rema soldiers, the young Estri felt almost disposed to welcome the loneliness of the dungeon as a contrast and relief. He lay and dreamed of the past, the pale face of the wizard's son, the earnest eyes of the maiden who was his wife, the hopes which had flooded his life to overflowing when he lived as an Estri on the Escola. The name of Ered was always near his lips, and the thought of her filled his heart with tenderness; though, bent by the depression of captivity, he had no longer strength to raise his hopes to her. Alas! the days in the dungeon served too well to reveal that there can be weakness in the bravest, gentlest natures, for the silence in which he himself preferred to sink seemed often better than the words of his companions. Their dispositions had jarred even on the march, and chafed still more bitterly in captivity.

They had excuses. A continual, clinging hope held out its prospect of relief from their master's camp; and to this constant torment of uncertainty was added the knowledge that even release would

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mean disgrace. Then Ivlon was a sufferer, not yet recovered from the cruel treatment of the Rema soldiers ; the wounds on his feet had developed into ulcers, and his weakness was irritated by continual pain. From that pain, weakness, and the chillness of the dungeon, came ague fits and sometimes burning fever, not lessened by the fact that his nature, strung to happiness, could not easily be in tune with misery. To the reproaches of his companion (for Uldic, stolid as he was, could not forgive him for the disgrace they shared) he replied with outbursts of rage which physical agony heated at moments to delirium. Ascar, lying apart, absorbed in his own dreams, paid little heed to the words of his companions, so that it was with a sharp thrill of amazement that one morning he saw the younger soldier fly at his companion's throat. Startled into action, he sprang quickly from the ground, rushed to them, and tore them asunder with his hands—keeping hold of Ivlon, whom he dragged into a corner, and held down, after he had laid him on the ground. It was then, and whilst he was still occupied with the struggle, for the delirium of Ivlon could not be overcome at once, that it entered his mind to remember how indifferently he had kept the resolution on which he had once determined. This man had saved him—and yet, in prison as on the march, he was leaving him to bear every trial alone.

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The thought bore its fruit, but his task was not difficult, for Ivlon's delirium subsided to penitence; and, terrified at his own outburst, the youngest captive became more than ready to accept reproaches. He could not rest till he had crawled to his companion, and entreated pardon with all humility—for Ascar, watching, saw him cling about Uldic's shoulders, repeating 'Forgive me,' like a child pleading with its father. The forgiveness bestowed, however, he crawled back to Ascar's side and lay there, too weak and in too much pain to move, an increasing illness which compelled the older captive to occupy himself with the duties of a nurse. It is possible that these may have been no useless training to one who had been brought up as an Estri on the Escola.

He was not left alone during the days and nights which followed, for Uldic continually came to his assistance, and Ivlon was grateful for the smallest notice from the big companion with whom he had lived in Alvo's camp. But it was to Ascar that Alvo's favourite clung, lying in his arms when his suffering was greatest, chattering to him when he had the least relief from pain, and always relieved even to see him at his side. The sweetness of his nature, overclouded for a while, became again evident through his sufferings, and impressed itself daily on the Estri's mind with an effect whose value could not at once be estimated. If something

of thoughtfulness and questioning remained as a relic from the wizard's son—if the idea of higher and purer existences could not be absent from his remembrance of his bride—in the darkness of the dungeon Ascar now learned other lessons as he watched day and night by his sick companion. He felt almost happy as he sat, wakeful, in the night, pressing the rough curls of Ivlon to his knees. But, as nights passed onwards, the gloom of the prison was increased by continual outbursts of delirium.

And then—came a change. As the three clung to each other, cold, sick, in stupor, too faint and depressed for speech, they were surrounded one night by guards who would not speak, and conveyed to another apartment where there was more of air and light. Better food was provided for them, clothes, and mattresses; and, their captivity being made lighter by more favourable conditions, their strength returned, and, though they dared not whisper of hope, the thought stirred in them that even freedom might be near. But days passed on till their new home became familiar, grey, chill, with a faint light gleaming through a grating—a prison where at length they could look on each other's faces, and whose miserable comforts appeared as luxuries. Mending rapidly, though his back and feet were scarred, and he was but a spectre of his former self, Ivlon had faint

returns of gaiety, and set himself to cheer his companions. And Ascar thought—if they could be allowed a little while during which to rest and become strong for life or death!

And then—

They were lying on their mattresses one morning, and Ivlon was chattering of old memories, the shepherd-life in which he spent his early years before he had ever heard of Alvo's name. All at once, through the stillness, they heard the tread of soldiers. The captives raised themselves, and their conversation stopped.

The steady tread became closer and more close. The door was unbarred. They could see the band of Rema. Its leader advanced, and came into the room, his practised glance turning from one captive to another. From the stolidity of Uldic, the pallor and darkness of the Estri, it passed and rested upon the face of Ivlon, who, lying upon his mattress, had raised his eyes to look, whilst his hand pushed back the rough curls upon his forehead. The leader addressed him.

‘Thou must depart with us at once.’

‘To what place?’

‘To the Ladri—the Place of Execution. It is three days’ journey from here, but it is the will of Ursan that thou shouldst be executed with the lowest criminals. Come at once.’

Ivlon rose as if he were moving in a dream.

His face was bewildered as though he had not understood the message. Mechanically he made two paces ; then stood still, and with another instinct turned towards his fellow-captives. They had risen from their couches—Ascar, pallid, miserable ; Uldic's great face bent with a weight of gloom. With a spring that did not allow of interruption, Ivlon threw himself on his old companion.

‘Uldic, forgive me ! Everything is just. I was in fault, and it is I who am punished.’

‘Thou ! thou !’ cried Uldic. ‘Dost thou think this will end with thee ? Dost thou think that our master will bear this from Ursan ? No ! He is ruined, we are all dead men ; and it is thy folly which has destroyed us all !’

‘Still forgive me,’ said Ivlon.

Without waiting for an answer, he drew his companion's face to his own and kissed it. Then he turned to Ascar, who advanced at once, and the young men held each other in a close embrace. Ascar could not speak ; he was shaken with tearless sobs, and was only able to clasp his companion.

‘This is death, Ascar,’ Ivlon whispered as they held each other. ‘We would often have been glad to die as we were forced along the plain. And now it is for me . . . and perhaps, when I am dead, both Uldic and thou may be restored to freedom. I wish thee everything thou canst desire—thy bride thy country, every happiness—only, when thou hast

these things, then say sometimes to thyself, "I had once a foolish comrade in some days when I was troubled. If there is any remembrance in the Silence of the Gods, I am certain that he has not forgotten me." Live in health! Live in health!'

Ascar's head rested on his shoulder. For one instant Ivlon clasped it with both his hands; then, tearing himself from his companion, went resolutely with the soldiers to the entrance. When he had reached it, however, he looked back—having, doubtless, gathered courage for the parting glance—to where the two others, neither of whom had stirred, leaned miserable, motionless, against the wall. For that instant they saw him—his hands thrown out gaily to them, his lips, his blue eyes, his pale face bright with smiles—and then, as the entrance closed, Ascar sank upon the ground, and, hiding his face in his arms, was motionless. When at last he raised it, after a long, long interval, and saw the grey cell and Uldic's gloomy face, all seemed dark and changed, as if their prison cell had once been illumined by a flood of sunshine. From the pain of that moment there was no escape. He let his head fall on his arms again, and cried

Two evenings after that parting in the prison, a horseman might have been seen on a mountain-path, pausing to dismount and to secure his horse, and then to find a narrow path among the rocks. For some while he pursued it on foot, and then suddenly

stood still, beneath a rock that was curiously contorted. It was the right place. From the shadow of the rock a woman's figure advanced and came to him. The man was Osmyn, hoping, in this secret manner, to gain at last some information of his comrades. He had already endured many toilsome wanderings since the stormy evening when he left Alvo's camp.

V I I.

Through the dim night, made dark by phantom hosts,
Comes a warm touch of human fellowship.

THE moment had come. Osmyn had followed the rocky path with a mind full of anxiety for his master, burdened by the oppression which at certain times in life reduces all feeling to a sense of heavy weight. And now, the step which had led him beneath the rock had taken him also on to a rocky platform, above which towered mountains, whilst beneath, in far-stretching distance, lay the dark hills of the Rema, red with sunset. Between him and that lowering distance stood the woman, a figure clad in the rough garments of the mountains, but with a dignity and undulating grace which the rude clothing imperfectly concealed. Her dark blue veil was wrapped closely round her head, but her hand held it beneath her face, which was uncovered; there was the handle of a weapon at her breast; and her eyes, which were dark and soft, looked full at him. Her words, when they came, were

in accents soft, distinct, in the familiar tones of the Alidrah.

‘Thou art Osmyn, Alvo’s soldier?’

Osmyn answered by a sign ; for, without knowing more of his companion, he would not commit himself to words. He towered in front of her, dark, upright, stiff, as if he were still sentinel in Alvo’s tent. It was in his nature to have a deep distrust of women, with whom, as Alvo’s soldier, he had little intercourse. Still, he would not neglect any opportunity which might prove to be to his master’s benefit.

Her voice spoke again.

‘I sent thee a message. Thou hast come.’

‘Who art thou?’

‘Let me tell thee my errand first. . . . Thou art searching for two of thy master’s servants—is it not so? Dost thou know that one of them is condemned to death?’

Her eyes were on Osmyn, and she could see the quiver which passed for an instant through his iron frame. It was only for an instant, for, when he spoke again, his voice appeared to have become rigid like his figure.

‘By whose order?’

‘By Maravel Ursan.’

‘Has he sent word to Estri Alvo?’

‘I know not. I only know that he has condemned his soldier. The cause is trifling. It is said

that Alvo's soldiers released a prisoner whom the Rema left to die. It is supposed that Maravel Ursan is incensed against Estri Alvo, and that he has taken this means to avenge himself. I can confirm this—listen! I will try to tell thee all, although I must speak of my own grief as well as thine.'

Her voice did not tremble, but it took the tone of sorrow, which filled it with anxiety and tenderness. After a moment's pause, she continued speaking with the same dignity and anxiety. To Osmyn's eyes she was a disguised princess, for he could see that her face, though careworn, was beautiful. But his mind was absorbed by the tidings she had given, and he could not free himself to think of her.

'My name is Arva. I am a daughter of the Governor of Neridah. My father is a prisoner in the Fair Country. We have known Estri Alvo.—Since my father was imprisoned, we have been living in concealment in the mountains. Some days ago the Rema soldiers attacked our home. I escaped with my youngest sister. The two others were made captives. I have been trying to find them. Last night, for the first time, I was able to learn what had been happening.'

Her voice trembled.

'It is terrible. I can scarcely bear to tell thee. The Rema soldiers spared them for the sake of Estri Alvo. They took them to Maravel Ursan,

and he—it is terrible!—he heard them when they appealed to him for Alvo's sake. And then, in the name of Alvo—Alvo, who never hurts a woman!—he condemned them to be given to the soldiers in his camp. The Gods will punish him—the Gods who were merciful, and opened a way for my sisters to escape. They fled through the camp—a Rema soldier helped them—and afterwards they found friends who sheltered them. One of them is ill—very ill. I must go to her. But first—oh! I was obliged to do one thing for Alvo's sake. It was on that night—on the night Ursan saw my sisters—that he condemned Alvo's shield-bearer to the Ladri.'

'Alvo's shield-bearer,' muttered Osmyn, and fell into deeper musing, which she respected, standing silently before him.

After a pause came the next words.

'This will kill the Estri.'

'What wilt thou do?'

'Canst thou ask what I will do? I will set out at once for the place of execution.'

'Wilt thou be alone?'

'I have no one to assist me. The Effar who are with me are all vowed to Maravel Ursan.'

'They will not hear thee.'

'I will ask only for delay. And then I will ride night and day to Ursan's camp . . . Art thou alone?'

‘I must go on to my sisters. . . . Ursan will kill thee.’

‘I must work for my master.’

Their eyes met. Brave natures understand each other. Osmyn knelt down on the ground in front of her.

‘Woman,’ he said, for the title seemed to him sufficient, ‘thou art fit to be a man, for thou hast a man’s faithfulness. I thank thee for my master. And now go on to thy sisters. For me, I live for the Estri, and am prepared to die for him. I would die a thousand deaths if I could spare him this one sorrow. . . . Farewell ; may all the gods take care of thee !’

He rose, and went down the path without looking back. He found his horse, unloosed and mounted it. With his face set, resolute, without any gleam of hope, he turned towards the country of the Rema. If he rode through the night, at the fullest speed possible, he might reach the land of the Rema by the dawn.

VIII.

For further life in this world I ne'er hope,
Nor will I sue . . .
Heaven has an end in all.

THE dawn had long faded ; the afternoon sun was waning, when a crowd of wayfarers collected on the rocks, looking down on the path that lay beneath, that they might see the procession of criminals to the place of execution. Most of these gazers belonged to mountain tribes—rough lads, with knives in their belts, and with burdens on their backs ; women, from whose veils peered the heads of babies ; and tall men, with the staves that belong to mountain guides. These clustered together ; but there was one who stood apart—a dark, strong man with his hand upon his sword—and all eyes, when not occupied in looking down for the procession, employed their leisure in glances at the stranger. He paid no heed ; he stood still, as one absorbed, with his eyes on the path by which the criminals would come.

Already the sun was sinking. The mountain opposite showed bare, red summits against a glowing sky, giving an effect of darkness to the pine-woods, and of shadows to the still lower green slopes crowned with trees. The 'Criminal's Path,' as it was called, wound round the rocks, so that from no place could much of it be seen; though a few boys, who had attained the highest stations, were continually asked for news by those below. The time seemed long, for to those who wait and gaze the shortest time has a taste of endlessness.

And then, suddenly—like the sudden termination of an illness which has been long known to be fatal—the rocky path became filled with the procession, which wound with it like a snake coiling round the rocks. Almost as soon as it was announced by the highest gazers it was visible, it was passing underneath; and all men and women, from their several stations, bent themselves forward that they might look at it. They dared not descend. It was the command of Ursan that the path of criminals should be left undisturbed, and none ventured to gratify his desire to see by disobedience to the law of the Marvel.

So it came—it passed slowly—the long line of Rema soldiers, and then of criminals with fettered hands and feet—cruelly fettered, for the mountain paths require a freedom of movement which had not been left to them. They seemed weary, the

criminals, for they did not raise their heads to look at the gazers clinging to the rocks ; they were either oppressed by the doom which lay before them, or worn out by the exhaustion of the march. The gazers cried at them, and sometimes jeered and hooted, with an absence of mercy characteristic of the Rema ; but there was scarcely a man in the weary throng who so much as turned his face towards the rocks. For the most part, their aspect seemed wretched and degraded, only able to inspire interest by its misery.

The gazers bent forward ; but there was one man amongst them who seemed to have found his first long glance sufficient, for, without turning himself again towards the captives, he moved from his place as if he would depart. To Osmyn, long used to the life of Alvo's camp, even glances were not to be given needlessly — he had only waited to assure himself that his tawny-haired comrade was indeed amongst the prisoners. That knowledge gained, he turned at once to descend the rocks, that he might brave death by confronting the procession. He directed his course towards a rocky platform, where prisoners were at times allowed to rest.

As he went he moved slowly (it was not in his nature to be nimble), but in his breast there was an unexpected tumult ; for the first time, Alvo's chief soldier, stern and grim, was in real danger from his own emotion. The sight of his comrade in the

ranks of prisoners, fettered like them and on his way to death, awoke burning sensations, which he could scarcely check even by the strong guard which he placed upon them. If he had obeyed the tumultuous desire which beat in his brain and made fever of his blood, he would have flung himself on those bands of Rema in a desperate attempt to save his companion. It was needful for him to remind himself repeatedly that such a venture could have no result but death. With a grim aspect, but a beating heart, he stood at length on the platform, and awaited the procession.

A few minutes later Ivlon, who, in the interval of rest permitted, had preferred to stand alone, apart from the prisoners, raised his head as he became aware of approaching footsteps, and then became still, as if struck with amazement. For an instant he remained thus, with wide-opened, staring eyes ; and then, as blood rushed to his face, sprang to his companion.

‘Osmyn!’ he cried, flinging out his fettered hands. ‘And I thought I should never see a friend’s face again!’

‘It would have been better for us if we had never seen thine,’ said Osmyn, standing grimly in front of him to keep him from advancing. ‘Why art thou here? What has placed thee in this position? What has become of Uldic? Tell me what folly thou hast committed. It was an evil day for our

master when he gave way to his weakness and allowed thee to be a member of his band.'

Ivlon's head sank low.

'Osmyn, do not be angry ; I have been punished, and I am close to death. . . . It was a small offence. But the whole fault was mine. Tell the Estri that it was I alone who was to blame. I disobeyed Uldic, and journeyed into the Effar land, and he was obliged to come and seek me there. And then, when we were together . . . there was a prisoner bound to a rock . . . and I released him, against the will of Uldic. And the Rema came on us. They never stayed to listen, but seized us, and took us to the Leopard's Den. They treated us cruelly. And now they have taken me away ; and they say it is Ursan's command that I am to be executed at the Ladri. . . . It is right, for I was the only one in fault. Tell the Estri, that Uldic may be released, if possible.'

'What does it matter,' Osmyn broke out violently, 'if Uldic, or I, or any other share thy fault? The result is the same—after once this thing has happened there can no longer be peace between our master and the Marvel. And it is resolved. I have been this morning at the Ladri, and they would not hear me, or grant me admission there ; I could only leave words, demanding in the name of Alvo that they should not execute thy sentence till they heard again from Ursan's camp

They scoffed at the words ; and this commander who is with thee has only listened to me with the like disdain, would only grant me this single interview, on condition that, meanwhile, I left my sword with him. And now I ride night and day to Ursan's camp, but they will have killed thee long before I reach it. . . . If it were only the death I suppose it is in thy nature to die for Alvo as the rest of us would die. . . . But it is shame, destruction, and I must go back to Alvo, and tell him that it is thy conduct which has caused it.'

Ivlon gave no answer. He turned towards the rock, and Osmyn could see that tears rolled down his face. After a while he murmured, to excuse himself, that—

‘He was tired . . . he was not strong enough for marching.’

In spite of his sternness, Osmyn felt that his heart smote him, and he came closer to his young companion. So wasted already! the young face and figure which he had been accustomed to see in Alvo's tent. And, even now, the moment for departure had arrived, and he must leave his comrade to the hands of enemies.

‘Walna,’ he muttered hastily, ‘we have but a moment more. Tell me if there is anything I can do for thee. They are forming the lines. Is there anything thou wouldst say—any message I can take for thee—to Estri Alvo?’

His own voice trembled, but Ivlon's tone was firm as he bent forward to whisper eagerly. He had mastered himself, and although his face was pale, he did not look as if he would break down again.

'Tell him that I love him, that I ask his pardon, on my knees, in the dust, for any injury I have done him. I was young, foolish, unfit to be his soldier; but I loved him, it was not by my own will I injured him. I accept my punishment. I entreat him on my knees not to hurt himself or the others for my sake. And oh! when everything is settled, and no more harm is possible, then tell him once more, when thou art alone with him, that I loved him!'

'Osmyn,' cried Ivlon, almost cheerfully, 'they are looking for me, they will not let me stay. This rest has made me strong; if thou wilt only wait for a moment, thou wilt see that I can walk with the best of them!'

As the Rema soldiers approached, he looked doubtfully at his companion, uncertain in what manner to take leave; but Osmyn, putting out his arms, took him in their iron grasp, as a strong father might enfold a son.

'Farewell,' he whispered. 'Thou must go on with the Rema, and I will hasten at once to Ursan's camp. Die bravely, if it must be so—I know thou hast courage. Once more, be brave, even if thou must be brave in death. Farewell.'

He let him go, and the captive did not stay, but at once became lost in the midst of Rema soldiers. Osmyn remained where he was, for, from the position he had taken, he could look down on the winding path of the criminals. Presently the procession was on its way again, and from where he stood he could see the line it made—the roughly-armed Rema soldiers with their spears, the dejected criminals, two and two, between them. All wound round the rock in turn; and presently, amidst the rest, he could see the slight figure, the tawny curls of his comrade. Ivlon looked up towards him, whilst walking steadily, and raised his fettered hands with a cheerful movement. In another instant he had passed round the rock, and Osmyn, without pausing, turned and moved away. He had no time for useless meditation, for he must set out at once for Ursan's camp. For the moment, however, we will not accompany him, for there is another path which we must follow to the end.

I X.

Ere we reach the shining river
Lay we every burden down.

THE first rays of sunlight shone into the Ladri—a collection of rude huts beneath an overhanging rock—though a lamp or a torch might be still seen here and there, for the benefit of the guards or prisoners. In the principal hovel, which was of some considerable size, there were many soldiers, and some fettered captives ; for a procession of prisoners had arrived the night before, and the more important of them were guarded here. In addition, there were a few who had been some days in the place, still waiting to be told the date of their execution. The uncertainty of that date did not touch more important fears, for no prisoner came to the Ladri who had not been doomed to die.

The torches kept out the morning in this principal apartment, but they could not produce there an unclouded light, so foul was the air through which they flickered dimly on the human beings with

whom the room was crowded. Dimly-seen forms, with fettered hands and feet, lay about and upon each other on the ground, for the most part overcome with weariness, though a few, favoured by the guards, had been able to obtain some strong liquor, and were drunk. The guards themselves had been drinking heavily, and were now squatted on stools at one end of the room, drinking, throwing dice, or bawling unseemly verses, whose melody was occasionally interrupted when one man clutched another's throat. There were a few benches of the rudest nature round the walls, and, as may be supposed, these were crowded with occupants—the prisoners having fought for them after they arrived, so that many of them still bore the marks of deadly conflict ; for, although their hands were bound, they were able to strike each other with the heavy fetters by which their wrists were secured. It has been already observed that these men were of the lowest order ; there were only two who appeared unlike the rest.

The first of these was a young man of slight figure, who lay in a corner, supported by the wall, sleeping so heavily that his slumbers were not disturbed by the songs of the guards, or by the fear of death. His slight frame, his evident exhaustion, and the fair, rough curls which clustered thickly on his bent head, gave him an appearance of youth and weariness, which, even in the *Ladri*, could seem

pitiful. Indeed, he appeared to rouse unusual interest, since at times faces turned towards him as he lay; and his sleep would, doubtless, have received some rough disturbance if it had not been guarded by a prisoner. This unknown protector, who had lived some while in the *Ladri*, had been present when the young man was brought in with the rest, and, pitying his condition of fatigue, had sat down close to him when he sank to sleep. He sat there still, a man clothed in a dark robe, with a grave face, upon which compassion rested. His eyes were upon the young features, and none ventured to molest him, for, as a prisoner of special importance, he could claim protection from the guards.

And now came the tread of soldiers, and from the ground on which they lay many heads raised themselves uneasily, for it was not infrequent in this time of early morning for a prisoner to be taken out to die. Most faces, however, were turned to the young sleeper, and it was towards him that the soldiers also turned. As their steps came nearer a slight movement stirred his figure, and he opened his eyes slowly and wearily. Even in the sleep, which had seemed such a heavy weight, the dream of the *Ladri* must have been present to his mind, for there was no surprise in the glance which slowly turned to the light of the torches and the figures on the ground. But he

could not at once understand that he must stand up to hear his sentence, and the soldiers, impatient of delay, pulled him roughly from the ground, and dragged him, with little ceremony, to the entrance, where they enclosed him whilst his sentence was read. The words were muttered hastily, and, still more roughly than before, they restored him to his corner, flinging him down upon the ground; and then, commanding that the other prisoners should not touch him, departed, telling him that they would soon return. He did not look after them. He continued sitting on the ground, with his arms round his knees, and his eyes staring in front of him. His young face was quiet, but through its soberness it wore an expression of bewilderment. Raising his eyes as if to meet an answering glance, he became aware of the older prisoner.

It was for this moment that the older man had waited, hoping always that some opportunity would be granted, so that he might show kindness to the young, weary captive whose appearance and history had interested him. Himself grave, strong, with a face worn by cares and sins, but unmoved by the death which could not be far away, he had in him something which could be stirred with kindness for the forlornness of this younger captive. The guards, who kept away the other prisoners, allowed him silently to retain his former place,

and during the interval before the soldiers came there might be some instants in which speech was possible. He bent himself, therefore, to his companion, speaking gently in the language of the Alidrah.

‘Thou art Ivlon, Alvo’s soldier?’

Ivlon’s face brightened instantly, for it was in his nature to respond to kindness; but, even then, in this altered, brighter aspect, it did not lose its look of perplexity. It was evident, however, that he had been surprised and pleased, for he at once drew closer to his companion. The older prisoner hastened to say the next few words, aware that the time permitted would be short.

‘Thou hast been condemned?’

‘I have been condemned to die.’

‘In what manner, if thou wilt permit me to ask the question?’

‘Thou mayest ask it,’ said Ivlon, with a smile. ‘I am to be given over to the javelin throwers. That is a favourite punishment with the Rema. I suppose they will have a morning’s sport with me.’

‘And thou—art afraid?’

Ivlon looked upon the ground.

‘I cannot tell if I am afraid or not. I am not afraid of pain, but there are things that trouble me besides the knowledge that I have brought trouble on my master. Seest thou—?’

He looked up with a question in his blue eyes.

‘I know myself by my head, my hands and feet, and if these are to be taken from me in the Country of the Gods, I cannot tell what part of me will be left. It troubles me—’

His head bent lower, and he sighed.

‘Shall I help thee?’

The younger man looked up with immediate readiness, a child's submission; and his companion, moved and wondering, strove to subdue emotion that he might keep his promise. When he spoke, after a while, his voice was cold and grave, but in its grave tones was the presence of compassion.

‘Thou askest me, first, what will remain of thee, and what life will be like in the Country of the Gods. I can only answer—It must be enough for thee and me that the wisest deem that there also we shall *live*. I can tell thee nothing further of the Akbare, of the Gods, of the Silence, of the Great Spirit from whom all things proceed. Put such questions away from thee, and only pray that the Gods may receive thee into another life. That thy mind may be clear, I will dare to ask a question, trusting that thou wilt answer honestly. Hast thou sinned?’

Ivlon raised his head, and his eyes became blank with thought.

Although I am a soldier, I have not known much of evil. I had a simple life till I joined the

band of Alvo, and it is only amongst the Rema that I have seen wickedness. Alvo kept me near him . . . he has often said to me that he would have one man entirely innocent. . . . I never joined them when they made sport with prisoners. . . . I had nothing to do with wine or women, because Alvo ordered me.'

'That is well. When I yield my breath to the Great Spirit my life will not have been innocent like thine. But still, thou art young—a man—and it is impossible that thou hast done' nothing to make thee penitent. There must be those whom thou hast hurt, whom thou hast injured, even if thou didst not intend an injury.'

'Ah! it is *true*; I have been foolish, disobedient; and I have brought shame on my companions and my leader. . . . And I have killed men, too, and set fire to homes, though always when I was ordered, or in battle. I never hurt women or children. . . . It is not of those things I think; but I think always that I disobeyed my leader. I loved him, he was good to me, and when I left his tent he told me that I must keep by the side of Uldic. . . . And I disobeyed him; and we were made prisoners after I had released a captive of the Rema. . . . And now . . . and now it may be that Estri Alvo will be separated from Ursan for my fault. . . . He loved me!' cried Ivlon, 'and it is terrible to think that he may have shame, and

even death through me. And I must die, and he will never even know how ready I should have been to die for him.'

He bent his head, for his eyes were full of tears, and his companion looked at him compassionately. When he spoke his tone was full of consolation. He spoke with firmness, as if there were no doubt in his mind.

'Comfort thyself. If Maravel Ursan leaves thy master the cause lies deeper than any fault of thine. Thou art but the pretext . . . if thou hadst obeyed thy leader the Maravel of the Rema would have found some other way. Doubtless, it grieves thee to be made the means of vengeance, but thou must accept that as thy punishment—And now, be silent—Think first that thou art sorry for any evil thou hast ever done. . . . Think of thy master, of all whom thou hast loved. . . . Yield thyself utterly to the Great Spirit. . . . Thou hast pain before thee. The soldiers will make it long. I know them; they will make it as long as possible. But even if thou wert to live from now till sunset, a soldier can bear a day of suffering. . . . They are coming.'

Ivlon rose, smiling gravely at his companion, and made him a cheerful sign without uttering a word; the guards surrounded him, and he looked round on the Ladri, its torches, daylight, prostrate figures, groups of soldiers. Avoiding

the men who lay upon the ground, he went to the entrance with an elastic step, then turned for a moment to see the other prisoner, who had also risen and stood to look at him. Their eyes met—but, as the young figure passed away, the Nira Councillor sank down on the ground. His own life oppressed him, though it may be in those instants he had at last merited forgiveness from the Gods.

And, meanwhile, surrounded on all sides by soldiers, Ivlon marched gaily into morning air, dizzy with brightness which filled every sense with wonder after the darkness, the foul air of the Ladri. The morning was beautiful, blue sky shone above, the grass beneath his feet was wet from heavy dew, there were hills, wide distances, and with every sense acute, there was nothing beautiful which did not appeal to him. With his head thrown back, and his young limbs moving freely, he could not think of the end to which the journey would conduct him. But the journey was short. . . . Suddenly, as it seemed to him, he found himself standing on a bare spot of ground, a spot from which the grass had been trodden out by many feet, and on which one solitary pillar had been reared. And it was *then*—as all halted, and stood still round him, and he saw the pillar, the bare ground, the heap of weapons—there rushed

upon him, with overwhelming force, the sense that some strange, tremendous change was close. For an instant he could have torn like a madman at the fetters which held hands and feet so that he could not free himself. On all sides around him life stretched, was beautiful ; and he alone, he must be crushed out of it.

His face became pale, but he did not lose his self-command, remembering even then that he must guard his master's honour. He walked to the pillar, and placed himself against it ; and the Rema soldiers stripped him, and bound his hands. Without paying attention to him, they talked freely to each other, each choosing the place at which his weapon should be aimed ; wondering, with various jests, with how many weapons they would be able to pierce their victim before he died. Their words did not hurt the captive, for he had not any fear of pain, but he could not recover from his bewilderment. If he could only be allowed a little respite—a moment in which he could prepare for death.

‘Is there anything thou desirest?’ the Rema leader asked, in an indifferent voice, as his comrades seized their weapons.

It was the question permitted even by the Rema to a captive upon the very brink of death. To Ivlon, possessed by death's fever at that instant, it came as water to him who dies of thirst.

‘There is!’ he cried. ‘Grant me a moment, let

me speak to the Great Spirit. I promise thee that my prayer shall not be long.'

The soldiers were scornful, but the boon asked was so trifling that they did not attempt to offer opposition ; but with some appearance of kindness drew away a pace or two, each of them grasping the weapon he had chosen. Ivlon then remembered that the time allowed was brief, and that he had not determined what to say. Without thinking, he looked away to the bright sky, and let the words come as they chose, without ordering them. It was strange how simply, how easily they came, in the soft accents of the Fair Country.

'Akbare, hear me, though I have lost my sword. Forgive me. Help me, for I am about to die—and all in trouble—my comrades, the young leader, all prisoners, all men. Hear me, Great Spirit.'

'I have done. I have not been long,' Ivlon cried in the Rema language, turning a bright face to the commander. The change was so apparent that the leader looked at him with surprise.

'Thou mayest have another moment, if thou wilt,' he muttered, with more kindness than he had shown before.

'I thank thee, no,' Ivlon answered, seriously.

‘The sooner it is over now, the better it will be for me. Live in health.’

The Rema only replied with laughter ; and grasping their weapons, moved away to take their place. Ivlon remained alone, with his hands drawn behind his back, still looking far away to the bright sky.

It was strange how content he felt ! Since the moment of his prayer there had not been left in his mind the least trace of bewilderment—nay, as he stood, upright, against the pillar, he seemed to be leaning on some supporting Presence. With a mind at rest, he hastened to arrange himself in a composed attitude of features, limbs ; for he had determined that, if it were possible, he would not move features or limbs until he died. He stood looking into the distance. Old memories possessed him, thoughts of his childhood, of the parents he had never known . . . and still he could see the long plain stretching onwards to where, in the distance, blue hills lay against the sky. Between him and those hills rose, indeed, a group of figures, whose movements he could also see, following them without concern—could see one of them take his position, some paces from the rest—raise his arm—

A few minutes later there was a sullen splash in the waters of the dark lake which lay beneath the Ladri ; and a band of muttering, discontented men returned in ill-subdued anger to the hovels. Never

before, in Ladri memories, had the Javelin-throwers deserted sport so soon. But they were not able to tell plainly all they felt, since their smothered rage was aimed at their commander.

‘I could not help it,’ said the old Rema to the friend with whom he sat drinking when the day had sunk to evening ; ‘I have never even wished to do such a thing before, but he had fair hair like my son who died ! He was pale, but he was brave. Ozran’s weapon struck his shoulder, but he did not move. His face did not move. I have never done such a thing before, but he was brave, and he was like my son who died, and I sent mine through his heart !’

In this manner died the youngest of the Ninety, Alvo’s favourite.

ALVO AND URSAN.

**Once to every man and nation comes the
moment to decide.**

X.

This above all : to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

MORNING shone on Ursan's camp, with its idle soldiers, idle revels—one of the loveliest mornings of the waning summer—causing the silver Tordrade to gleam as a line of light, and glittering in each weapon, on each standard of the camp. The revels to-day, however, were not open or free-hearted, the soldiers preferring, for the most part, to stand silently amongst the tents, looking in each other's faces, but scarcely venturing on speech. Doubtless, if they could have been delivered for a while from the fear of the Maravel, and the spies of the Maravel, the dullest would have been able to find some form or expression for the vague restlessness which possessed them all. For all minds turned to the thought of another camp—the camp of one who had lost a shield-bearer.

Ah, it was strange ! Through the whole of that idle summer—the effortless summer, which had not

won the Fair Country—there had been only a few rumours, expressed more in looks than words, to circulate restlessly, vaguely, in the camp. And now, these were *tidings*, there was no longer room for doubt, the news which had arrived this morning was not in need of confirmation. There was not a soldier of Ursan's, however ignorant and brutal, who did not know that a deed had been done which must have lasting consequences. The tale of the captives had long perplexed their minds; but that might have explanations, this deed was irrevocable.

And now, following close on these perplexing tidings, a solitary horseman had appeared suddenly in the camp, announcing himself to be one of Alvo's soldiers, and demanding to be taken at once to the Marvel. A dark, strong man, with a face set in sternest lines, he had looked on the Rema with no appearance of dismay, though the news of his comrade's death greeted him from every side. To Rudol, who hastened with the same tidings on his lips, he had replied quietly that he was in no need of information, but that he must speak at once to Marvel Ursan in Alvo's name—a request which was granted almost immediately. Already he had disappeared, and the eyes of the Rema soldiers asked what the Leopard would do with this other victim, for since the day on which Lipsus stole a treasure, the soldiers had found themselves in some

need of sport. Yawning and stretching, they lay down upon the ground, and, drawing out their wine-skins, prepared to enjoy themselves. The day might yet come for another festival, in which a more valuable prey would be given to their hands at last.

They yawned, and, meanwhile, in the shelter of Ursan's tent, Osmyn stood alone before the Marvel. With his wonted expression only a shade more grim than usual, he stood before Ursan and saluted him.

The men looked at each other. It was not the first occasion on which Osmyn had seen the leader of the Rema, but he had never happened to reside in Ursan's camp, and had never before been so close to the dreaded Marvel. That morning, before entering the Rema camp, he had for the first time heard of the death of his young comrade; and it may be supposed that, although the news could not surprise him, it had produced some effect, even on his iron disposition. The thought of the young companion from whom he had so lately parted, left to die alone in the midst of enemies, the consciousness of the disgrace which had been inflicted on his master, burned like eating fire beneath the calmness of his bearing. They did not disturb it outwardly—he had not lost the remembrance that this leader was bound by close links to his master, and it was in his soldier-nature to give outward tokens of respect, though his brows were dark, and his lips

closed on each other. Ursan, meanwhile, from amidst his bales of goods, looked with curiosity on Alvo's man. Perched on high, as usual, the Marvel seemed a little figure, but his eyebrows were ominous, and his pale eyes full of light.

'Welcome,' he murmured in his mellow voice. 'I understand thou hast come from Alvo's camp. My brother-leader sends me such courteous messages, it gives me pleasure to receive another from him.'

As he spoke his eyes rested on Osmyn with the peculiar expression of those which have been long used to examine men. It is possible that a leader who was not the Marvel might not have chosen to hold this interview alone.

'Marvel,' said Osmyn, 'I do not come from Estri Alvo, although, as his soldier, I speak to thee in his name. I have to ask thee by what right or authority thou hast executed one of my master's men.'

Ursan laughed softly—a low, pleasant sound, succeeded by the pleasanter murmur of his voice.

'Ah! that execution?' he murmured. 'A young fool disobeyed my laws, and I chastised him as I had a right to do. Alvo is wise, and he will understand that I was obliged to avenge the release of my prisoner. Go back to thy master, and tell him that I have given his men a lesson which he, being wise, will know how to appreciate.'

Osmyn paused till it was evident that no more would follow.

‘Maravel, these words will not satisfy my master. Thou hast taken my master’s soldier, and for an insufficient cause hast bound him, imprisoned him, executed him. Never once hast thou written to my master on the subject, to explain thy wrong, and give occasion for satisfaction. The blow was not aimed at the soldier, Maravel, but at the leader who is thine ally.’

He paused, then proceeded,—

‘My master is not a coward. The lives and honour of his men are dear to him. It will be impossible for him to receive this insult except in the manner in which insults should be received. Thou alone art responsible, Maravel, if, when my master hears the news, the alliance he has maintained with thee is at an end. It is for thee to give explanations and excuses, if thou hast any desire to negotiate with him.’

Ursan laughed still more softly.

‘Our little Alvo is so brave! Perchance he may wish to attack the old Maravel! But why should I fear him and his ninety friends—eighty-nine—when I have my thousands, and am in no need of him? Nay, Alvo is brave, but he is as wise as he is brave, and his ninety friends—eighty-nine—will be wise and quiet with him.’

The repeated mistake had been intentional each

time, but if Osmyn experienced a thrill it was not visible in his bearing. His answer was quiet.

‘Maravel, thou art mistaken if thou dost imagine that we will sell our honour for our lives. We would rather lose them than hold them at the mercy of a leader whom we know to be perfidious. If thou hast no further message, Maravel, I give thee my master’s defiance in my own.’

Ursan looked at him.

‘Thou art bold. But it occurs to me to remember that thy master, after all, is not blessed with many soldiers. How if I were to order thee to execution, and reduce the number of thy master’s friends to eighty-eight? We have a Rema proverb—our Rema proverbs are so rough!—that even a cock will not crow when it is strangled. At this rate it will be scarcely possible for thy master to conquer his beloved Fair Country.’

Osmyn answered quietly.

‘Order me to execution. That will do little harm to my master or myself. For if thou hast determined on the destruction of my master and his soldiers, it matters little if we die one by one or all together. And for myself, I care not for the Fair Country, or for life on earth, or for the Life beyond the Silence. There is not a drop of blood in all my body that does not belong rather to my master than myself. If I live, it is only that I may

be at his side ; and if I die, other friends will care for him.'

He ceased, and there was a long silence. The voice of Ursan broke it, in a murmur sweet, piercing, like that of an instrument.

'I would thou wert my soldier.'

The words were so unexpected that Osmyn, for the first time, started convulsively. Recovering himself, he spoke, but his voice was slightly shaken, though with its want of control came an accent of disdain.

'Maravel,' he said, coldly, 'a faithful leader will have faithful followers. Now that I have become acquainted with the Leader of the Rema, I no longer wonder that the Rema are treacherous.'

'Ah ! thou art bold.'

Ursan's voice had lost its vibration, but there was more depth than before in its mellowness.

'And thou art not afraid of torture ?'

'I am not afraid of torture.'

'And—thou dost not fear that thy insolence may destroy thy master ?'

Osmyn paused, and the light which is not to be described seemed to overflow the pale eyes of the Maravel. It is possible that he had gained what he desired, understanding how to treat his antagonist. His voice, when he spoke, had an earnest, honest sound, which seemed to convey that he meant the words he said.

‘Listen. I will tell thee the truth. It may be that, as thou sayest, it is not possible for Estri Alvo and myself to be allied. But thou art Alvo’s soldier, his trustworthy friend, and it is necessary for me to say another word. I would speak with Alvo, and to that end I am prepared to come to his camp, and trust myself to him. Will thy master be ready to give me his safe-conduct, that I may be able to discourse with him face to face?’

Osmyn did not reply. He went on in the same tone,—

‘I am ready to offer pledges even before they are demanded. I will send a hostage of my own to Alvo’s camp. I will release the soldier whom I hold in the Leopard’s Den. More than that, I assure thee, with the utmost faithfulness, that in this proposal I mean no harm to thy master. If thou repliest that thou wilt not trust the Maravel, thou wilt ensure the immediate destruction of Estri Alvo and his soldiers. Believe me, thou wilt in the best manner serve thy master, if thou dost in no way oppose this interview. Wilt thou resist me?’

For a while Osmyn did not speak. His mind was occupied in considering the position. It was with a reluctance that was visible, but still with firmness, that his words fell at last.

‘I will take thy message.’

‘Wilt thou resist it—my proposal?’

‘I will not resist it.’

Ursan smiled, and rose to his feet. His movement indicated that the interview was over. With the charm of manner which served him instead of grace, he put out his hand that Osmyn might assist him to descend. Rigid, motionless, without stirring limbs or features, Osmyn submitted to the touch of the Maravel, which lay lightly on his arm as, with an ease younger than his years, Ursan descended from his bales of goods. As he reached the ground, and stood by the side of Osmyn, his head was not higher than the shoulder of the giant ; but his manner, undisturbed by fear or hesitation, had a serenity of royal confidence. He signed to his companion to accompany him ; and, to the amazement of the army, they came out together side by side.

Side by side they went through it. The curious eyes of Osmyn surveyed this camp, so different from the camp he knew ; looked on lounging soldiers, half-clothed even in the daylight, and the dark eyes of ragged women, who peered curiously at him. Ursan seemed to pay little attention ; he did not even take the trouble to return the salutes which greeted him from every side ; but the respect and dread in which he was held were evident, and even his indifference appeared that of a king. All at once he paused, made a slight motion with his hand, and in an instant they were surrounded by

multitudes of men—of hands clutching half-drawn weapons, of dark faces, hungry eyes, which fixed themselves greedily on Alvo's soldier. Ursan's eyes surveyed them for an instant ere he spoke, his softly-spoken words piercing through the multitudes,—

‘Take him and kill him.’

He turned silently to Osmyn, and the foaming waves restrained themselves for a moment. Upright, unmoved, though as one who is in a dream, Osmyn laid his hand quietly upon his sword. His eyes met those of the Maravel, who murmured,—

‘It will be worse for thy master if thou dost resist.’

Their eyes still met. Osmyn uttered not a word. He drew his sword, and let it fall through his fingers to the ground. Then, motionless, with his arms hanging by his sides, he waited, expecting the rush of multitudes. Ursan raised his hand, but the multitudes fell back disappointed, and there could be heard the soft laugh of the Maravel.

‘I was but jesting. I wished to try thy courage. Take thy sword, I will conduct thee to the border of the camp.’

For an instant he laid his hand on Osmyn's arm; and, half-bewildered, Osmyn yielded to his touch and moved. Through the throngs of soldiers who fell back as they approached, through the camp's tumult they went on side by side.

And now they stood near the border, unaccompanied, save by a group of Rema leaders who had chosen to follow them, but who dared not, without permission, approach the Maravel. Ursan had halted, and Osmyn stood by his side, prepared to give his stiff salute, and then depart. He would not hasten, because it might be of importance to his master for him to hear parting words from the leader of the Rema. The parting words came, and with new bewilderment he felt that he had not been prepared for them.

‘Estri Osmyn,’ said Ursan, giving him his Fair Country title, ‘I have pleasure in saying I am satisfied with thee. Thy master has in thee a trustworthy servant. Is there any gift thou wouldst ask of the Maravel?’

A sudden thought shot through Osmyn, made him breathless. His eyes looked back towards the group of Rema leaders. There was one object on which his glance had fallen almost as soon as he had entered the camp. Ursan, on his part, looked in the same direction, and seemed to foreknow the words before they came.

‘My comrade’s sword!’

With an imperious gesture, Ursan signed to Rudol, who approached unwillingly.

‘Give me thy sword!’

Green with rage, but without resistance, Rudol unsheathed his sword, and handed it. Ursan took

it, and placed it himself in Osmyn's hand, with a manner not destitute of royal dignity.

‘Take it,’ he said, ‘that when thou art with thy master thou mayest remember the old Maravel.’ And, without waiting for the return to his salute, he took Rudol's arm carelessly, and turned away. Osmyn's eyes looked after them for a single instant, but it was necessary for him to leave the camp at once. . . .

Before the day was over, regardless of fatigue, he was once more on horseback, on his way to Alvo's camp; and on the same evening a little band of Rema started with a new message towards the Leopard's Den. Ere they can reach it, we will seek those ‘sunless dwellings,’ and renew acquaintance with the captive we have known—the link of a shadowy chain which has become a barrier between the leaders who seek the Fair Country. Already strange echoes are muttering in the mountains—let us reach the dungeon before the storm has burst.

X I.

But reason thus : ' If we sank low,
If the lost garden we forego . . .
Yet we may rise until we reach
A height untold of in its speech—
A lesson that it could not teach
Learn in this darker dwelling-place.'

ASCAR was alone. He was still in the apartment which he had once shared with two companions ; but since the last of those companions had been taken, his own imprisonment had been made more severe. To heavy rings round his ankles, beneath his shoulders, were attached chains, which were fastened to the wall, with a length indeed which allowed some liberty of motion, but with a noise in movement almost unendurable. It followed that he spent his time, by day and night, lying on his mattress with his face towards the ground, scarcely sleeping or thinking, but in a continual dream, to which weakness and languor continually disposed him. Through this dream came remembrances, but these memories came without exertion,

as if they too dreamed with him. It was the first time that he had spent alone since, bound to the rock, he had been face to face with death.

Much had happened since then. Lying on his mattress, motionless, he found himself often with his two companions—the stolid face of Uldic rising close to him, the rough curls of Ivlon resting on his knees—so that, solitary as he was, it often seemed as if, in some fashion, he had companionship. He had been told nothing of the fate of his companions—they had gone out from the darkness, and he was left alone.

Sometimes other dreams rose. His captivity slipped away, and he found himself once more at the Escola, standing with Olbri on its rocky platform, and looking down to the moonlight in the streams. He never seemed to speak with the wizard's son—some undefined feeling rose as barrier—there seemed some reproach in the pale face, the keen eyes, before which he shrank as if he felt himself to blame. But Olbri was near him ; and Ered, too, was near—Ered with her fair hair, her gentle, haunted face, looking at him with eyes full of strangest dread, as if under a spell, afraid to be close to him. These were near—then they changed, and once more he was with Ivlon, toiling with him over the plain, beneath the sun ; or they were in the dungeon, and with despairing clasp he held his companion in the last embrace. He felt no pain

now ; possibly it was the case that captivity could crush out the sense of pain.

So he thought. And then one night he awoke suddenly, awoke from hot, broken, unremembered dreams, and for some while lay staring at the darkness, unable to remember in what place he was. He moved, his chains clanked ; and all at once he was overcome by such a convulsion as he had never known. Life rose in him, struggled, and with desperate agony asserted its right, its determination to be free. He tore at his chains ; he flung himself upon his face, and cried out loudly to the darkness, to the Gods—he demanded his hopes, the bride chosen by his manhood, the country where his father had been born and died. Sobs tore his breast, hot tears streamed down his face, but there came no voice, no answer from the darkness. Exhausted, he lay still—and then again the agony seized him ; but as it crept round him another fancy rose. Through the unfathomable darkness of the dungeon there shone once more the lights of his wedding-night. Ah ! with what a terrified, haunted face she sat there—the maiden whom he had compelled to be his wife.

He sat up on his couch. Other features, forms were rising—the face of Olbri on the night of their last parting—the blue eyes of Ivlon, perplexed to understand why the captive whose life he had saved would not speak to him. He saw himself in the

old days on the Escola, imperious, lordly, crushing all wills to his own—then selfish in misery, even in imprisonment refusing companionship to his fellow captives. He had gained—his reward! stripes, chains, and loneliness, a defeated life, the slow death of captivity. With a gentler movement he turned his face to the mattress, and for some long time slow tears fell silently.

Then came the reaction. After all, there was little justice in denying even such good as he possessed; it could not be necessary, even to condemn himself, to assume the judgment of an enemy. He must have loved Ered, for at this moment every fibre responded to that love as they had done in bygone days; it could have been no mere idle craving for her beauty which fashioned that tenderness and reverence. And he had loved Olbri, had loved him honestly, in spite of the cloud which gathered round their parting; and Ivlon—for had he not held him in his arms during the long days and nights of burning fever? If all these were gone, if even Uldic had been taken, stolid, impassive, unresponsive to the end; if the last faint shadow of companionship was over, was there nothing left but remorse and loneliness? Surely it was better for him to rouse himself, to make resolutions even in solitude. If his past days had not been free from faults, there might still remain some power of better life.

Lying in the darkness, Ascar tried to turn his mind to that which might be near him — the Country of the Gods—but his mind shrank from it, the Silence pressed upon him, it was not possible to suppose that he desired it. Death, indeed, was familiar, had been often close—there had even been moments when he would have welcomed it—but it was too evident that, as long as strength was left, the instinct of his fibres was to cling to life. Then let it be so, so long as even in the dungeon he preserved the remembrance of his duty to the Gods, guarding his life, setting it in better order, and so becoming more fit for life or death. He would not be listless. Every day whilst he had strength he would walk in his dungeon as well as his chains permitted. He would keep it in order as far as possible, so that, even in his cell, life should be beautiful. A new hope touched him, as if in some mysterious way he had found an outlet from the dungeon to the sky. But it was with the murmur of Ered's name that he turned upon his side and slept, to dream once more of the wedding-feast. Perchance some unspoken voice of secret instinct warned him, even in the dungeon, of the coming of his bride.

For the bride approached. On a distant mountain side two women pursued their way to the Leopard's Den, journeying steadily both by

day and night, yet not fast, lest they should be worn out too soon. They slumbered in turns, each one watching by the other, but when they walked they were always side by side—a strange couple! unlike, of different natures, races, and yet united by the dangers which they shared. One was dark, small, with brilliant Rema eyes, keen, sharp as the knife which she carried in her belt; the grey veil of the other half-concealed a sunken face, worn to the appearance of a spirit's beauty. She spoke but little, and her tired, dreaming eyes looked before her as if they sought the journey's end; but her companion sang, chattered, even whooped, and cheered the journey by her shrill, Rema laugh. In this manner, keeping always side by side, the wives of Ascar and Uldic sought their husbands.

Ered did not complain. Since the evening—long ago!—when she had gone down the rocky path into the shadows, and, looking up to the friends whom she was leaving, had seen them bathed in the light of the dying sunset—since that parting from the first home she had ever known, she had set herself to endure and be resolute. The promised guide who, on that well-remembered night, had come out suddenly from the rocks and stood before her—the dark, fierce-eyed stranger, with a long knife in her belt—had indeed little resemblance to the Roses of Neridah; and the timid Slave-Estra, startled and repelled, felt at

times unbridged gulfs between herself and her companion. But the two women, sharing danger, travelling in the same direction, reduced entirely to companionship with each other, were neither of them so destitute of womanhood as not to feel drawn by links of sympathy. In her lonely life as slave, bride and wanderer, Ered had been often left to solitude, and there were times when this unfamiliar intercourse touched her with a new sense of companionship. The Rema wife, meanwhile, had her own sensations, which she revealed with native openness.

‘Seest thou?’ cried Naritah, tossing back her dark, short curls, as in evening sunlight they walked on the mountain’s side. ‘The Rema told me thy husband was with mine, and that Alvo had given thee a ring for the Marvel. I was not sure I would go, for I will not be imprisoned—it is hard enough sometimes to be bound at all!—but I will go now because thou art so pretty, and it pleases me to take thee to thy husband. I carry a knife with me, and I can tell thee I should not be afraid to strike any man. . . . Thou hast such soft hair! When thou art asleep at night I take off thy veil and bathe my hands in it.’

Ered smiled faintly. They were on a mountain path, and before them two peaks were grey against the sky, whilst beneath them water was pale in evening light, and mysterious pallor and stillness

reigned on all. Once such a moment would have been entirely fraught with her sensation of invisible presences—even now the remembrance made her breath come quickly, and with some reaction she turned to her companion.

• ‘But thy husband—thou hast loved him?’

Naritah answered with disdain,—

‘He was big, strong, stronger than the Rema soldiers. I always said that I would have a strong man for my husband, but now that I have him I am tired of him. He made me promise him by the Rema Gods that when I was his wife no other man should kiss me; and the Rema soldiers used to give me gems for kisses—but I dare not break my vow, although I am tired of it! They tell me that Alvo and his soldiers will be killed, and, if that is so, I shall not have my husband long; if it were not for that I would choose another husband, for my man could easily find another wife. Thou art of the Fair Country, and I suppose that when thou hast found thy husband thou wilt desire to stay with him.’

Ered answered bitterly,—

‘I am not of the Fair Country. I am a Nira captive, and a slave. I am a coward, for I dared not tell my husband how much I dreaded the anger of the Gods. And now I know not what the Gods will do with me. I seem to feel them drawing me towards my husband; and yet, if I find him, they

may drag me back again, or punish him because I choose to stay. I have no country, no husband—' her voice broke into cries—' I am only a woman, and the Gods are powerful.'

It was the first time since she had left the Escola that her passionate grief had pierced through her reserve ; and even then it was checked almost as it rose by the remembrance that she had a companion. In silence they went on together side by side, the evening darkening around them as they went, till stars shone out, and the peaks became grey and purple, though in a cloud-rift lingered the opal of the sunset. Ered was thinking, ' If the Gods should be leading us by ways that they know although we are ignorant.' It was the first time that hope had touched her anguish since the terrible evening of the wedding-feast.

And now they were walking through night, trees and hills were indistinct, and the pale water could scarcely be distinguished ; but above them the whole sky was aglow with stars, sparkling and throbbing as if it burned with light. Who was it had told her that by different ways different natures attained the Country of the Gods? . . . Her long, weary wandering slipped away from her ; she stood with the wizard's son on the Escola. And still her eyes sought the stars, dim through her tears, as she went through darkness with her companion. Where was he whose pity had once been near

her trouble, as they stood together upon the Escola?

As Ered's footsteps draw near at length to Ascar, we, too, for an instant will seek the wizard's son. Had he, who had given help to Ascar's bride, himself found the way to the Country of the Stars?

X I I.

Not by water only . . .

IT was at this time—that is, the time of early autumn, when the sun's rays had become mellowed like the year, when fruit hung in clusters, and slow crawling mists filled the beautiful valleys of the Alidrah—about this time a new and more hopeful legend began to stir vaguely in the Fair Country. No idea, indeed, dawned there that the delay of the invading armies might be caused by some smouldering division between their leaders ; the demons remained terrible as they had been before, but an idea of an opposing demon had arisen. It was asserted that one of the leaders of the Nira—of the army which lay between Alvo and the Alidrah—had secured a *familiar*, or evil spirit, by whose help he had organised his troops. This *familiar* condescended to be visible as a man (distinguished, however, by a horrible appearance), and it was possible that the procrastination of the hostile armies might be due to this spirit's friendly

offices. How the Nira leader had lighted on this doubtful friend was a question that few people took the pains to ask; but the credit of the Nira camp grew every day, and bodies of wayfarers found their way to it. It is in this way that a nation can recover strength, even through the medium of an outcast it has banished; for it was upon no more solid trust that the hopes of the Fair Country rested at this period. Let us ask ourselves how Olbri—if indeed this man were Olbri—had been able to acquire so much power and influence. He had gained them by means of the most sharp experience with which even his life had presented him.

On this wise.

It was on a summer afternoon, some while before the time at which we have now arrived, that the leaders of the Nira army met together in their Watch-Tower that they might hold a consultation. Their army had at that time been lately organised, and its condition was not satisfactory; they were in daily fear that they would be attacked by Alvo, and were not reassured by the last news from the Alidrah. Under these circumstances they gave the most stringent orders that their consultation should be left undisturbed—orders disobeyed as soon as they were assembled, by some hasty messengers who broke in confusedly. A man was below who would listen to no reasons, but insisted

on seeing the leaders of the Nira—a man with the appearance of a vagrant, clothed in rags, and with a horrible scar upon his face. The leaders of the Nira looked in hesitation at each other ; they were exceedingly anxious to proceed with their consultation, but at the same time, in those troubled days, no chance of information could be missed. It was possible that the fellow might be a messenger from the Alidrah, who, on his journey, had fallen in with the enemy ; or a spy, who, for his own purposes, had assumed a vagrant's rags ; or even a prisoner escaped from Alvo's camp. They decided to see him, since, if they were being troubled needlessly, it would be easy to punish the fellow afterwards ; and accordingly gave orders that he should be admitted, after being duly warned that he was in danger of chastisement. Before, however, this order could be transmitted the sound of tumult was heard upon the steps, and, crying out, struggling against those who barred his way, the vagrant himself appeared suddenly before them. Ragged, haggard, with the appearance of a madman, stretching out his lean arms towards them in entreaty, there was nothing in his look to inspire them with confidence, or induce them to hear him with respect. A confused babble poured deliriously from his lips ; he appeared to be entreating assistance rather than giving information—and the members of the Council, at first quiet from

amazement, rose at length in wrath to command him to be silent. He would not hear them, and as he continued speaking, their indignation against him rose to fury. In those troubled times, permitting little consideration, rough measures were speedily resorted to. The man was pronounced suspicious, dangerous, and was dragged down to the courtyard to be scourged. It was whilst he was being seized for the execution of this sentence that the senses of Olbri at length returned to him.

A moment of vision ! Since he had left Alvo's camp he had been starved, worn with fever, wandering, till his keen brain was clouded, his physical strength exhausted, and his old quickness had almost deserted him. And yet, through all suffering, he had remembered that he must seek out the leaders of the Nira ; and it was this resolve, acting on an excited brain, which had grown into frenzy till he could not control himself. And now he had seen them ! and as he stood before them he had realised that his self-control was gone, that he could not keep himself from delirious chattering, though aware that his last hope was being thrown away. The scene was torture, but it was happily soon over ; and as he was seized his old mind returned, and he became calm, collected, sensible, capable of thought, aware of his position. Possibly it was the consciousness of danger which aroused him,

accustomed all his life to danger; or the reaction of an only half-crazed brain which had still power to turn upon itself. Delirium remained only in the intensity with which his mind clung to the thought of a final effort; not, indeed, of again appealing to the Council, but of seeking some leader to whom entreaty could be made. In all his life Olbri had never been more resolute than when he was dragged to the courtyard for punishment—a poor, tattered wretch, condemned by all bystanders as a madman in whom an evil spirit dwelt. As they bound him to the pillar he was sufficiently aware of the punishment which lay immediately before him; and yet, all the time, his keen and steady eyes were trying to discover if there were Nira leaders present. Suddenly a voice rose, and the few words which it spoke were distinct through the crowd's silence of expectancy.

‘He is young.’

Alvo's words! Olbri turned his head at once in a desperate hope for the young leader's face, worn, beautiful, looking at him with dark, clear glance, come there to deliver him in extremity. But it was not Alvo—only a portly Councillor, who was there with other leaders to see the punishment, standing on a rude platform which had been erected immediately beneath the entrance to the Tower. No matter! The words were Alvo's words—had pity—this man was a Nira leader; the appeal

should be to him. Like a flash the resolve found its way through Olbri's brain ; but the executioner approached, and punishment began.

The blows fell. Once before the son of Olloto had endured this agony, this humiliation, and he had borne pain and shame disdainfully, proud to prove before multitudes that he was not a coward. He was weaker now ! With each blow as it descended it seemed as if body and soul were rent asunder ; he was swept into an eternity of suffering, each instant broken by shafts of burning pain. At first he only shuddered with every blow in turn ; and then he heard his voice as if it had not been his own ; and then his horrible cries rang through the courtyard, so that the bystanders shuddered as they listened. Accustomed through life to conceal his suffering, there seemed a luxury in this humiliation ; his cries seemed like those of an imprisoned spirit which had at last struggled to the surface and was free. They became fainter at last ; they died away in gasps . . . he became aware that his punishment was over. . . . He was still by the pillar, but his hands had been unbound, and his few rags had been thrust over him. His head was dizzy, he could not move for fear of falling—in what manner should he seek the Nira Councillor ?

Still resolute, with an unbending resolution that appeared to hold even his very bones together, his

mind sought for some means to give himself a moment's strength, that he might be able to act, if it were only for an instant. Not far from the pillar was a jar of water. He made signs for it to be handed up to him, and when he had received it into his trembling arms, after waiting an instant, he raised it to his head. The water rushed down; ludicrously, pitifully, he stood dripping with water as well as blood; but the shock had revived him, he had gained the strength he needed . . . in another instant he was before the Nira Leader. One glance, one movement had been all that he required . . . he was before the leader, and he fell down on his knees.

‘I entreat thee to hear me. I wish to speak with thee. Bind my hands, and then let me speak with thee alone.’

Many voices rose, but Olbri was only conscious of the face of the man who was looking down on him. The others were speaking; they were entreating the leader Celius to have nothing to do with this impudent proposal, with this fellow who was mad, dangerous, might be a spy, who had mentioned Alvo, and might have come from him.

Olbri's voice rose again, as clear in utterance as when he was with Ascar at the Escola.

‘Can I hurt thee? I have not saved myself. I only ask to say a few words. Art thou afraid of

me? I am unarmed, wounded. Even the devils give me no help.'

His voice trembled. The leader turned to his companions; a few words passed between them; Olbri still knelt on the ground. When men came, raised him, and led him to the Tower, he knew not for what purpose, and had not strength to ask. And then, when he felt rather than knew that his desire had been granted, that he was in an apartment with the leader, and alone, all strength deserted him, and sinking on the ground, he heard, as he crouched there, his companion's voice. Not the voice of Alvo, vibrating, full of genius, and yet kind enough . . . Olbri crept close to his knees. The great face of Celius bent down over him, pitying, good-natured, not without dignity.

'What hast thou to tell me? I have only a little time. Thou hast asked to speak. Now, speak; tell me everything.'

And Olbri, still crouching low upon the ground, laid his hands humbly about the leader's feet. He did not know his own voice, it was rapid, passionate, with the agony of one who holds his last chance in his hands. The words came clearly, the clearness of desperation, for beneath this one foothold the gulf was fathomless.

'I belong to the Fair Country. They said my father was a wizard. They never allowed me to mix with other men. A nobleman helped me.

He became the captive of the Rema. I was accused of cowardice, and they branded me. I was banished from the land. . . . There seemed one thing I could do. I went to Alvo's camp that I might kill him in his tent. I was discovered, and he was noble, good . . . oh, noble, generous! . . . he would not punish me. But he sent me away from him . . . I belonged to his enemies . . . he told me he would meet me on the battle-field. I have come here. I have come here to entreat you that you will let me be a soldier in the Nira camp. I have had no hope; I have had no chance all my life. Give me one chance that I may make use of it.'

'It is impossible!' cried Celius, stepping backward.

But Olbri only clung to his feet more desperately.

'Think! I have been punished for what I never did; my father was punished for what he never did. All my life I have been hunted by men who never asked whether I deserved the punishment they gave. I am not a coward. I burned the brand from my face. A coward would not have been able to bear the pain. Give me one chance that I may become a soldier, and may meet Alvo on the battle-field.'

'Impossible! It is impossible!' cried Celius. 'Thou art an outcast, branded, they will not receive thee in the army. I am sorry for thee—sorry—I would help thee if I could, but I will not

promise an impossibility. Thou hast been branded for cowardice, and whatever story thou mayest tell, it is impossible to believe thy innocence.'

'Then let me be guilty!' cried Olbri. 'Believe freely, if thou wilt, that I deserted my only friend in the presence of the enemy. Oh, if that were true, would it not still be cruel, that for one fault I should be punished all my life? Think! I am young. I have a life before me. Am I to be condemned for ever for one fault when I was young?'

'I cannot help thee. It is impossible. The other leaders would refuse. . . . Impossible!'

He moved.

'Wait an instant,' cried Olbri; and with a passionate, imploring gesture he clung to the feet of Celius, and laid his face on them.

As he raised his face he met his companion's eyes, and Celius muttered,—

'It is impossible.'

Saying these words, the Nira leader turned away, with the expression of one who has said everything.

Then Olbri rose. He was no sooner on his feet than he was compelled to sink upon a seat, but at that moment it did not concern him whether he stood or moved, or had courage, or otherwise. His last hope was gone, and as it parted from him, there returned the full flood of pain and weariness, his exhausted life, the hopeless days before him,

the absence of strength which forbade any further trial. Tears came luxuriously to his exhaustion, concealed by the fingers which he kept before his face; he was as one who, at the end of life, finds such leisure for grief as he has never known before. He did not suffer. His whole being was too weary for further suffering to be possible. But Celius watched him. The face of the Nira leader worked strangely, as if unusual thoughts were rising there.

Was it wonderful? The bent form on which he looked was no longer that of a vagrant with a scar. He could see only the young figure, slim and boyish, the delicate, supple fingers, bending head. He was so young! And, after all, he had only asked for an opportunity. Oh, was it for a leader, contented, prosperous, to deny, even to an outcast, a chance of better life?

Olbri moved at length. The luxurious, quiet tears had refreshed him as water upon long-parched ground; and, though absolutely exhausted, he was sensible that with his last strength he must get outside the camp. His eyes had the blank, indescribable expression of one who feels himself at the end of life; there was even a faint smile upon his lips, and, with his hand, he gave some motion of salute. But as he did so Celius caught his hand and arm; and, as a long, horrible shudder passed through Olbri,—

‘I have decided,’ he cried out to him. ‘Only serve me faithfully, and thou shalt stay with me.’

In this manner Olbri gained his desire at last, gained it not only by water, but by blood, imagery which paints faithfully enough its confused sensations of healing and pain. He was so ill that for long days, and even weeks, he was tended by the leader whose help he had entreated; and even when fullest consciousness returned, was at first too weak to make any use of it. But strength revived slowly; and Celius, watching by him (for the Nira leader nursed him good-naturedly), was daily amazed at the quick wit, the keen opinions of this poor wretch whom he had sheltered out of pity. The first day had impressed him, for, after he had taken Olbri to his room and laid him on a couch which was placed near his own, he had told him before leaving him that fresh recruits were admitted to the army when the trumpet sounded in the morning. Departing immediately, he forgot his words—the more easily since he did not return that night—but he recalled them when, in the early morning, as the trumpet sounded, he again saw Olbri. A sight to be always remembered!—the huddled, shivering wretch, only able to move by the exertion of all his will, with his poor rags thrust over him as best he could, staggering forward, a blot upon the sunshine. The pity of Celius

was roused ; and, leaving his soldiers for a while, he himself conducted his visitor to his apartment, and saw that he had comforts, and that food and drink were near him, before he returned to his duties as a leader. The scene impressed him ; from that moment he never doubted that this outcast, this criminal, had qualities.

And Olbri himself? As life and strength returned, and with them the desire to pay for benefits, he watched eagerly for every opportunity of helping the leader who had befriended him. The leader Celius had much experience, but his mind moved slowly, though with ability ; it was strangely reinforced by a wit as quick and daring as any that could have been found in the Fair Country. After a little while he trusted Olbri—in a little while longer trusted him implicitly. And so Olbri rose from his sick-bed at last, and for the second time returned to life.

Life, however, was different. Dark shadows lay upon it. He no longer hoped or planned, or had dreams of the Fair Country. He performed each day's duties, but always with the sensation that he was fulfilling some will that was not his own. Perhaps he had suffered too much, had lost the springs of expectation. And yet it seemed as if some last trial lay before him. The most distinct and foretelling consciousness was that he would meet Alvo on the battle-field.

For he had not forgotten Alvo. If in his memory the warmest, most human affection clung to Ascar, the young leader appeared as the spirit, the demigod, fascinating all men who came near him. The enemy indeed of himself and of his country—an enemy whom he would meet with a weapon in his hand, but still a leader whom he could not hate or curse, and by whose hands it would not be hard to die. His nature rebelled against this subordination, but fascination was stronger than rebellion. He would not be ashamed of the young leader's mastery, though when he met Alvo he would fight with him.

Meanwhile, he submitted to the touch of shadowy hands, drawing him closer to shadows every day. He scarcely asked himself if this submission was that of obedience to Unknown Powers. Throughout his life his conception of the Gods had been that of a nature reckless, sceptical; he had never leaned on the idea of help from them, or believed they would assist those whom human beings rejected. Now, at the end, for he seemed to be at an end, it appeared that he had been saved in extremity; and for the sake of gratitude, for his dead father's, Ascar's sake, he would make the best use of what remained to him. The soldiers mistrusted him, but his experience had already taught him to live in loneliness.

XIII.

From this hour the summer rose sweeter breathes to
charm us ;

From this hour the winter snows lighter fall to harm us ;
Fair or foul—on land or sea—come the wind or weather,
Best or worst, whate'er they be, we shall share together.

ALL, however, are not lonely. It was at this very time, when autumn was chill, even in the Fair Country—whilst Ursan still lingered, and messengers of evil were within a day's march of the young leader's tent—whilst in the Alidrah the governor of Neridah lay in prison, and Envar and Maro disputed for power—in the midst of this dark autumn and these evil days, Ered and Ascar again stood face to face. For the last time we will linger before an approaching contest draws us irresistibly to Alvo's camp.

They looked at each other. Ascar had been summoned suddenly by messengers who had not told him the meaning of their errand ; and now, as one blinded by light after long experience of

darkness, he stood bewildered, and did not even move or speak. During the last few days his captivity had been lightened, and he had been granted food, clothing, other comforts; but the languor and dizziness of imprisonment were on him—he stood, vision-possessed, haunted by bewilderment. Was this being with bright hair and sunken face the bride who had been near him on his wedding-night? Had that bride indeed, left alone and unprotected, forced her way through dangers, and come at last to him? His lips trembled—his knees; and the only word he uttered shook as trees shake before a rising storm.

‘Ered!’

Ered trembled. If Ascar was perplexed, she, on her own part, was not less bewildered; so different was this prisoner, pale, haggard, with deep-set eyes, from the young bridegroom whose image she retained. Yet the tone of his voice had an echo in her memory—the tone of deep feeling which no woman can forget—and she trembled before it, as in days long ago she had trembled before the love she was yet afraid to lose. Her own voice rose with a plaintive, appealing sound, as if she were answering a charge of faithlessness.

‘Ascar, I have come. I have done all I could . . . I have jewels for thy ransom; I have a ring from Alvo . . . It may be that I shall be able to rescue thee from prison. It was I who injured

thee, but I have done what I could for thee. Oh! do not hate me.'

The last words were involuntary, her woman's feeling rushing from her against her will. A faint smile on Ascar's lips replied to them—perhaps in that instant he recognised his bride. He held out his hands, and took hers in his own—then stood, motionless, gazing deeply in her eyes; whilst little Naritah and the Rema guards, amazed, curious, stood watching eagerly. They did not disturb those they watched—who, in the midst of multitudes, would in that instant still have been alone. A strange feeling was on them as if at last they met, a stranger feeling as if they had never met before.

Ascar murmured;

'Thou art altered; thy face is worn with trouble. What right had I to impose such suffering? Oh, Ered, I have hungered and thirsted for thy face, but now I see it I am reproached by it. Speak to me. Tell me all that is in thy heart. Tell me even that I forced thee to be my bride against thy will. I am not as I was. I entreat thee to forgive me. I thought that I loved thee when I brought thee suffering.'

Still holding her hands, he drew her closer to him, but with a movement so gentle that she was not afraid. She stood looking into his eyes without any fear or shrinking, almost with a sensation

as if she were at rest. Yet, as soon as she spoke, her voice broke into sobs, for the strain of her wandering still pressed upon her. With a determined movement she tore away her hands, and pressed them upon her breast to control herself.

‘Ascar. . . .’

She controlled herself. With her hands pressed on her breast she stood bent towards him, in the attitude of one who speaks—her eyes full of tears, her lips parted by her thoughts, her gleaming hair falling back upon her shoulders. This was not the slave, frightened, silent, vision-haunted, oppressed by the burden of her fantasies; and yet something of the slave lingered in her womanhood, though the strength of her feeling broke through all restraint. Her voice was tremulous in spite of her resolve; but to be silent was impossible.

‘Ascar, listen to me. In the old days I was afraid; I dared not tell thee all that was in my heart. I will tell thee now. . . . I know, the Gods let me know, that I had no right to consent to be thy bride. The land was in trouble. I—I was a slave. I had no right to draw on thee the anger of the land. At least I should have waited till better days had come, or until I was sure that I had permission from the Gods. I was a coward. The Gods punish cowardice. . . . They punished me. They gave thee captivity. . . . Oh, I was miserable on thy wedding-night, when I felt evil

would come, and yet dared not speak to thee . . . I have spoken now. . . . And I will tell thee one thing more. In those days I dreamed that the Gods had countries like ourselves. I thought they punished me because I was a Nira and had no right to wed with a noble of the Alidrah. But now—I am not sure. Ever since one evening of my journey . . . when the night was silent, and I looked up to the stars . . . ever since that evening there have come to me other thoughts, as if the Gods are above our human countries ; as if they have their own land, and would draw all men to it. Speak to me. Tell me what I ought to do. Am I to leave thee, or can I stay with thee?'

Ascar took her hands. They lay quietly in his own. An irresistible yearning almost overcame him. But oh! had he not given her pain enough already? Was it for him to control her will again? With an effort, as if he were tearing out his life, he let her hands fall, and turned his face aside. She was nearer the Gods than he was. His captivity had been useless if it had not even availed to teach him self-sacrifice.

'Ered,' he muttered, 'the Gods must speak to thee. I dare not. I have not courage. I have never learned their will. I will not compel thee. . . . Tell me what they say to thee . . . what thy heart says . . . and then either go or stay. I will not speak.'

Yet he looked into her face. Her tear-filled eyes were gazing out into the distance. She did not see him, or know that he looked at her. She stood motionless, save for a slight quiver in her frame. All at once her eyes dropped. The tears fell down her face. A rush of blood burned her forehead and her cheeks. . . . Her eyes rose, met his. With a sudden, woman's cry, she hid her face in her hands and fell on his breast. His arms enclosed her. They were silent, motionless. He could only feel that he had gained his bride at last.

‘Well, Estri,’ cried Naritah, in her sharp Rema tongue, at whose sound Ered drew herself from her husband's clasp, ‘thou hast taken her at last! I have been watching thee that I might know what thou wert going to do with her. Thou hast not yet kissed her. I can tell thee, if thou wert a Rema, thou wouldst not find it an easy task to get a wife.’

‘I will kiss *thee*,’ cried Ascar, and made a step forward for the purpose; but Naritah retreated, putting her hands before her face.

‘Kiss thy wife. She has been my companion, and I have been a friend to her; perchance a much better friend than thou wilt be! I can tell thee that we have taken pains to find thee. I am not sure that thou deservest them!’

She laid hold of Ered, whose face was still flushed and softened by the moment of a woman's supremest loveliness ; and, taking her in her arms, kissed and caressed her face and hair, and, drawing her to the ground, fondled her as if she had been a child. Then, rising with her, she held her out to Ascar.

'Take thy pretty wife, Estri—too sweet a morsel for thee ! As for me, I must go. I will seek my Rema kindred, since Alvo allows no woman in his camp. They say that my man was as indifferent to freedom as he always showed himself to captivity. He will not want *me*. Men are such animals. My darling, farewell. If thy husband ill-treats thee, come to me !'

Ered clung to her with embraces, wistful kisses, the lingering clasp of a maiden on the threshold of another life ; and the other wife, in spite of her Rema nature, was tenderly unwilling to leave her companion. There was no tenderness, however, in her voice when she turned to Ascar with her dark eyes bright with tears,—

'Use thy pretty wife well, Estri. She will be too good for thee, but every woman is too good for her man. I must leave her to thy care.'

And with her arms stretched out to Ered, little Naritah passed from the prison and their lives. As she vanished, Ered sprang, and remained standing for an instant with her arms thrown out and a

clinging sense of loss. For it is to a woman that a woman clings in those supreme instants when the old life joins the new.

Then the new life opened. The dark-faced Rema soldiers appeared to be interested in the bride and bridegroom ; perhaps fearing the ring with the names of the two leaders, or impressed with hope of a ransom for the Estri. Anyway, to his own surprise and satisfaction, Ascar found himself treated with unexpected favour, promised an apartment which his bride could share, and even wine and guests for a wedding banquet. And so, on that same evening, in a cell above the earth, lighted for the occasion with torches fastened to the wall, with Rema guards round him, and Ered at his side, the Estri of the Escola held his wedding-feast. The presence of the Rema was not to be dispensed with, although the soldiers drank much and jested loudly ; their excitement, wild laughter, and unrestrained conversation becoming each instant more unbearable. These were slight trials, however, to a bridegroom who was a captive, who had been driven by the Rema across the endless plain . . . and, as night became deeper, guards and torches disappeared, and he was left in his prison with his bride.

XIV.

Miser est omnis animus vinctus amicitia rerum
mortalium, et dilaniatur, cum eas amittit.

ON the succeeding day a band of horsemen, with Osmyn as their leader, entered Alvo's camp. They carried with them Lipsus, who had been sent as a hostage from Maravel Ursan to his brother Maravel.

The camp lay in autumn sunshine. The narrow eyes of Lipsus devoured eagerly a spectacle which they had often wished to see—the rows of tents, the gold spear on the leader's tent, the great hills towering like guardians at the back. All through the journey he had told himself that he would at last see the wonderful young leader; and now he was aware of his work, if not his presence, in this strange camp, moved as by machinery. He had seen it! and now he had only to see Alvo, and after that he would have nothing more to wish. He was grateful to Maravel Ursan who, instead of killing him at once, had allowed him the excite-

ment of this journey. There was no need to ask what his destiny would be, and it may be added that he was indifferent.

They stood in the camp, having dismounted from their horses, and Osmyn gave instructions to his band of Effar, greeted the companions who gathered eagerly about him, and despatched a messenger to Alvo's tent. Standing there, bare-headed, in the autumn sunshine, Osmyn looked grim, immovable, as usual—if there was the deadliest shrinking at his heart, there was no sign of it in his demeanour. He said little to his companions, who, on their part, understood that the message from Maravel Ursan was reserved for his master's ears. And now, a messenger arrived hastily from Alvo to desire that Osmyn would seek his tent at once. Lipsus followed him; and, in a few minutes, the hostage of the Rema stood in the presence of the Exiled Leader. It was a moment that was not to be forgotten, both for its own sake, and all that followed it.

Was this Alvo? They stood together in the outer tent—Osmyn and Lipsus, and the messengers from Ursan—when the curtains moved, and, from the inner part, a man came quickly, and advanced immediately to Osmyn. So this was Alvo! Dark curls lay on his forehead; his eyes, brown or grey, looked from one man to another; they shone with pleasure, and his thin

face was flushed with eagerness, surprise, delight like that of a child.

‘Osmyn!’ he cried, and even as he said the words the flush left his face, the light failed from his eyes; they became dark, absorbed; his lips took the serious expression of one who prepares himself for difficulty. He looked at Osmyn, who saluted him silently, then at Lipsus, at the Rema leaders—then he spoke.

‘Is all well, Osmyn?’

This first sentence from his voice impressed Lipsus as much as the change in his face had done—for, although low, its tones had a peculiar vibration which distinguished them at once from those of other men. Osmyn did not reply, standing silent, immovable. Alvo paused for an instant, then spoke again.

‘Thou hast come from Maravel Ursan?’

Osmyn assented by a sign.

‘Thou hast a message from him?’

‘I have one, Estri.’

‘I will hear it afterwards. Thou hast seen Uldic . . . Ivlon?’

‘I trust that Uldic will soon be in the camp.’

‘Ivlon?’

There was no answer. The face of Alvo became paler. His breath came and went. After a while he spoke again.

‘Where is he?’

‘He has been with the Rema. He did not obey thy command.’

‘Is he *afraid* to come to me? He need not be!’

The words were like a cry, like the clutch of a drowning man. Osmyn let them fall into silence—then he spoke. His stern voice had no need to take another tone. But he kept his eyes on his master, watching its effect on him.

‘Estri . . . he was in the power of the Maravel of the Rema.’

‘He is *dead*!’

There was no answer. Osmyn still looked at his master. For one instant Alvo remained entirely motionless, his eyes straining, and his arms rigid, bent slightly forward, as if he had lost consciousness. Then, suddenly, he threw out his arms, and as he did so he cried out—a cry so sharp that all who were in the tent retreated.

‘Leave me! Leave me!’ he cried to them; and even as he spoke he sank backwards, clinging to the tent-pole with his arms. It was that sight which remained upon the eyes of Lipsus—the thin, clutching arms, the tent-pole, the sinking figure, as, huddled with the others in the entrance to the tent, he waited till further instructions should be given. No sound came from within, though they were so close to the leader that even the Rema dared not speak of him.

He did not detain them long. Before they had time to be impatient, Alvo came himself to recall them to his tent. He made them sit down on cushions, and himself took the high seat which he was accustomed to use when there was a Council ; leaning his elbow on a socket in the pole, and resting his face on his hand as one who listens. In this attitude, without uttering a word, without moving, he remained whilst Osmyn told his tale ; his eyes, large and liquid as those of a woman who has been ill, fixed without change upon his follower. Lipsus could not but observe ceaselessly the slender figure, the pale parted lips, the thin hand of the Maravel—he kept his attention on him whilst Osmyn spoke, and the other Rema listened in gloomy silence. When that one sound was over, Alvo moved at last ; until then he had been still as one who sleeps.

‘ Call all the men, Osmyn. I will speak to them.’ His voice had a strange clearness like his liquid eyes, there was not in it the faintest tone of harshness, and yet it conveyed an impression of unalterable decision. The Rema leaders looked at him uneasily, but they did not speak, whilst with a gentle manner he dismissed them ; asking them to wait for him on the ground before his tent, where he would come as soon as the soldiers were assembled. Lipsus followed them, walking with Osmyn ; and as they turned to make their salutes, he saw

Alvo's eyes rest on Osmyn with agony—though only for an instant, for his face was absolutely calm as he returned indifferently the salute of the Rema hostage. No doubt the young leader was still of many moods; and yet even Lipsus, who had seen him only for an instant—for that one instant before he looked into Osmyn's face—understood that he had seen an Alvo who would not exist again. With a clouded brow, and lips set by many thoughts, the Rema hostage stood before the leader's tent. The camp was astir; through the failing autumn light there echoed soon the tread of multitudes.

A strange vision! The camp in a glow of evening light, the great hills behind it, flushed beneath, purple-grey above, the masses of soldiers crowded on each other, the solitary figure on a rising ground. Alvo wasted no oratory; his words were clear and stern; in a voice that did not falter, he declared all that had been done; announcing that from this moment in which he addressed his army he was no longer allied with the Marvel of the Rema. Some ceremonies would be necessary, no doubt, before the alliance was at an end, and until they were performed he must ask the soldiers to be quiet; when they were over the Rema would depart, and with them all who were vowed to their Marvel. His own men would stay, and for the remainder of the army it was at liberty to leave him

if it preferred to do so. And then, suddenly, a great shout rose, vibrated ; it shook the echoes,—

‘We will stay with the Maravel.’

And now, all was over. From the troops he ruled so sternly Alvo had found men who would be faithful to him, who would give up all hopes of favour from the Rema to support a doomed leader and a sinking cause. In the first excitement the moment had its danger ; hot passions rose, the soldiers grasped their weapons, it needed all the young leader’s influence to prevent a conflict which would have been fatal to his friends. It was prevented, though in what manner none could tell ; the camp became quiet, the soldiers drew off in bands, and the Rema leaders, after some few scornful words, saluted Alvo with disdainful movements and retired. As the stars came out in the sky, Alvo retreated to his tent, surrounded by the leaders who had vowed to stay with him ; and actively, vigorously concerted measures by which the camp could be kept quiet and secure. His momentary triumph had not excited him ; the shock he had received had in no sense dulled his brain ; his clear, keen vision saw the danger of the instant, and concerned itself only with immediate need. Even when at last he bade them farewell for the night, and in a few graceful words thanked them for their faithfulness, his voice hardly trembled, or expressed even the emotion which might have been expected from

him at such a moment. But as they departed, and he turned round abruptly, and, passing Lipsus, went into the inner tent, the Rema saw that he felt his way with his hands, that his eyes were glazed as if he were struck with blindness. He went by, the curtain of the inner tent closed on him, and Lipsus was left in the outer part alone. Apparently he was forgotten ; and, weary with travelling, he resigned himself to pass the night as best he could.

The night, however, was long. He was still excited with his journey, with all that had happened since he had been in the camp ; he could not compose himself enough for rest, and kept on waking with starts from fitful slumbers. He was cold too, and had no coverings ; hungry, for no food had been given him ; and his Rema pride became more and more possessed with the idea that his master's envoy was disdained. Goaded to movement, he crept softly to the curtain, and listened to hear if there were any sound within ; he fancied he could distinguish footsteps, and to all his other feelings began to be added that of curiosity. Rema though he was, he hesitated for a while ; but the night in the outer tent seemed endless, awful—any change was welcome which offered companionship. He laid his hand on the curtain with a bold, yet trembling movement. It parted—he stood before the Maravel.

A lamp was shining. By its light he could see

Alvo, who seemed to have been walking up and down the narrow space—arrested now, and standing still in the midst, with his gaze on the intruder and the parted curtain. He did not look as if he had been thinking, although he was awake ; his expression was as if he had been aroused from sleep, or rather from the opiate of steady footsteps with which he had been treading out the pain of thought. His brows contracted as he looked at the Rema ; some indignation was roused with consciousness.

‘Maravel!’

‘Who art thou?’

His tone was sharp, and for an instant he stretched his hand out for a weapon ; then let it fall with a despairing movement, as if he said, ‘Thou mayest kill me if thou wilt!’ Lipsus was uneasy, and anxious to explain his conduct—his uneasiness took the tone of injury.

‘Maravel, I am an envoy from the Maravel of the Rema. I have been given no food, no lodging in your camp. Since thou wilt not tell me, I have come to ask thee in what place it is thy will that I should sleep. I have to say, Maravel, that it will be to thy disadvantage to ill-treat one of my master’s followers.’

Alvo seemed bewildered. He took up the silver lamp, and by its aid scanned the features of the envoy. Some remembrance returned slowly,

and Lipsus assisted him, still with his former tone of injury.

‘I have been in thy tent, Marvel. Thou didst leave me there. I heard from thy footsteps thou wast not asleep.

‘Ah! A spy!’ said Alvo, with a bitter movement of his lips.

He turned away, muttering a few words in his own language.

‘Can he sleep who has lost a friend?’

The murmur was just audible.

‘Marvel,’ said Lipsus, in a steady tone, ‘I understand the language of the Fair Country.’

Alvo stood in surprise. The Rema seized the opportunity to express an indignation which brought colour to his face.

‘I am not a spy, Marvel. I am as honest a man as thou art. If thou wert not a Marvel thou shouldst ask my pardon.’

Still standing where he was, Alvo looked at him with more surprise. It almost appeared as if he felt some interest.

‘I ask thy pardon,’ he murmured, smiling faintly.

And suddenly stepping forwards he took the envoy’s face between his hands. Dropping it after he had held it for a moment, he muttered,—

‘An honest face for a Rema face!—So thou hast had no food, no bed,’ he murmured; ‘and

yet my camp is not inhospitable. What shall I do for thee? It is late at night. A bed thou canst have at any rate. Take mine.' As Lipsus hesitated, he added a few more words: 'Thou wilt do me no injury. *I* shall not sleep.' And suddenly his eyes shone with fire or insanity. 'Have no fear either, the helpless are safe with *me*.'

Turning, he made himself busy with arrangements, spreading on the hard mattress some cushions and coverings; then, as Lipsus still hesitated, taking hold of him and laying him down by main force on the bed. His attentions did not end even there, for he spread the coverings about him, touching them with hands so gentle in their movements, that to the Rema, accustomed to the life of camps, the sensation was not short of bewildering. As he laid down his head, however, Alvo turned away, muttering, 'Do what thou wilt to me; I need not fear thee;' and fell once more to pacing up and down, as if he were indeed without a companion. As for Lipsus, he slept—but he remembered all his life the night he passed in the young leader's tent.

With the morning the camp was astir, full of amazement, for it had been unprepared for the sudden change; already sharply divided, and yet so confusedly that men scarcely knew their friends from enemies. One thing only was clear—and that was clear to everyone—the young leader had

broken with the Maravel of the Rema, had given up every prospect of ambition, and renounced for ever his dream of the Fair Country. Some blamed, some derided, many occupied themselves in hazarding prophecies on his future fate ; but the wisest held aloof, content to observe events, which could not now be slow to declare themselves. Since already it was whispered that Ursan would appear, they waited for the coming of the Maravel. No doubt every matter would be soon concluded when once the camp had received such a visitor.

X V.

Stellæ in ordine.

URSAN was coming ! Before another night arrived, his expected visit had been formally announced ; and the army, still dizzy with bewilderment, had a certain event on which to prophesy. He was coming—the Maravel to whom so many owed allegiance, who had been bound by such intimate links to the young leader, on whose favour depended Alvo's ambition, even his life. They would be face to face ! the two leaders who had never met since they had set out to win the Fair Country ; since the days when Alvo, the favourite of Ursan, had been the most trusted leader in his army. On one only point the whole camp was agreed—all knew that this meeting of stars was ominous.

And Alvo ? During those days the observed of all observers, his behaviour offered little room for comment ; quiet, absorbed, attentive to his duties, he did not open his heart to any one. If it was

evident that he was changed, if his beauty had lost its magic animation, it was not less obvious, as days went on, that he still possessed his old power over men. The quiet Maravel, speaking little, smiling faintly, had a keen gaze for the behaviour of his army, could still avert danger and command devotion as in days when his prospects had been brilliant. No other leader could have kept off a tumult in times so unsettled when hatred rose so high, but even in the presence of Rema insolence Alvo never for an instant lost his self-control. He had the habitual manner of one who endures so much, that ordinary anger becomes impossible. A few were moved to compassion by his patience, but on the whole the Rema resented it.

One Rema there was, however, who did not live with the rest, and whose keen, shrewd gaze was always on the leader, the little envoy who, since his entrance in the camp, had lived habitually in the young leader's tent. Always in danger (for the return of Uldic rekindled the frenzy caused by Ivlon's death), he seemed as indifferent to the hatred of the Exiles as to the emotions of his own countrymen. For the greater part of the day he sat observing, whilst the young leader held innumerable councils, and at night arranged his couch in the outer tent, and fell into slumbers undisturbed by dreams. Alvo rarely spoke to him, and the few words he said were not marked by more than his usual courtesy, but even

such graciousness was a novelty to one who had spent his life in Rema camps. Lipsus was silent ; but his shrewd, simple mind had been long accustomed to tacit observation. His hatchet, his brown face, made a strange impression on those who had been used to another presence in the tent. . . . And so the days passed—autumn darkened towards winter—and men asked each other when the Maravel would come. The continual expectation of his coming produced a tension that was intolerable.

But now—Ursan came ! On a certain winter morning, pale and bright with mists, with blue sky, fleeting sunlight, the excitement of the camp, which had been at fever-heat, rose to that of pulses too rapid to be counted. From the earliest dawn of that memorable day, soldiers listened, waited, and strode about the camp ; discipline was relaxed, leaders mingled with their men, and all were tremulous with dread and expectation. The distant sound of Rema instruments struck painfully at last on tightened nerves and pulses ; and even men used to danger all their lives were conscious of terror they had never known. How would this day end ? With a peaceful separation, a quarrel, a battle, or a massacre ? Would the Leopard, always swift in exacting vengeance, be close to his prey, and yet not spring on it ? How would Alvo meet him—Alvo, his favourite, who had been called his son, supposed to be his heir ; Alvo, left alone

in his own tent all that morning, to devour alone his terror or remorse? It was the sensation of doubt, uncertainty, which hung like a weight upon the wisest spirits. The white sun, hanging low in the winter sky, had a dubious look, as if it might set in blood.

And now—

On the marshes, white with early frost, the long line of Rema soldiers could be seen. They came forward in order ; against the winter sunlight their shadowy hosts advanced towards the camp. And as they did so, from each side of the camp echoed instruments calling all men to their ranks. Marshalled in order, each section beneath its leader, the army of Alvo awaited the Maravel. It stood firm ; yet none knew whether, in the next few instants, each man's sword might not be in a neighbour's breast. Waiting for orders, with fast beating hearts, they stood with drawn weapons beneath the winter's sun.

The Rema advanced. At a little distance from the camp they halted in order, so that the armies faced each other. And then from their lines, shadowy, immovable, a small group of figures broke, detached itself. Still shadowy, black, a little group of horsemen, they advanced over the frozen marshes to the camp. And as they did so a cry of instruments announced that Alvo came to meet the Maravel.

The army was arranged on each side of the camp, leaving an open space, stretching back to the leader's tent. Down that space came Alvo, on horseback, with other horsemen, whom he had chosen to be his body-guard. Before the border of the camp he halted, as the other group paused before the rough bridge and the ravine. He dismounted; and at the same instant, from the other band of horsemen, a solitary figure detached itself. It advanced on horseback; whilst, bareheaded and on foot, Alvo came forward alone towards the bridge. He stood—Ursan reined in his horse—they were once more face to face, the leaders who had set out to win the Alidrah. Breathless, without knowing what to fear, what to expect, the soldiers kept their eyes on the two leaders, and were still.

XVI.

Is it peace ?

WERE the leaders troubled ? For one instant they did not move. Then Alvo, bending, saluted the Maravel ; and, coming forward, saluted him more profoundly ; and coming forward again, knelt with one knee on the ground. Rising, when he had paid this customary salute of welcome, he advanced with a supple step to the leader's horse, and taking its rein in his hand, without uttering a word, he led it over the bridge into the camp. The general excitement, dread, and expectation gave to each action a deep significance. All men's eyes were on the two—one on horseback, one on foot—who advanced with a slow pace through the midst of them. In the army were many who, at different times, had seen the leader of the Exiles with the leader of the Rema ; but even to these the sense that times were changed gave the sight an aspect that was entirely new. No one spoke, no one dared to move, and with slow motion, without speaking, the leaders

went on together through the midst. Every soldier who saw the two men at that instant saw a sight which he remembered all his life.

What were they like? Ursan sat on his horse, unarmed, without troubling himself to assume any dignity, with a loose hand on his rein, yet with that in his bearing which gave his negligence the aspect of a king. He wore a red robe, which was somewhat worn and frayed, for he was always indifferent to his attire ; and upon his grey hair was a narrow band of silver ; and another, wider, more ornamented, round his neck. As he rode he did not look to the right hand or the left, his eyes being drawn beneath his brows, and deep with thought. The Marvel to-day wore his most kingly aspect, imposing even to those who loved him least ; but the men who looked from him to the other leader became aware of other royalty. Unmoved by the majesty of his companion, with his hand on the bridle, Alvo walked on steadily. At that moment he owned an appearance and expression such as none present had seen him wear before.

What was the change ? He had not lost all his gifts. His bearing was upright, and his step elastic ; the hand on the bridle was delicate and firm, the slight motion of his figure had all its usual grace. But to those accustomed to his variable beauty, to its bright, flashing glance, quick changes of expression, the rigid face, with its set lips, steady eyes,

was altered almost beyond recognition. Lately, indeed, he had been quiet, different, but never with such a difference as this. The motionless face was a bewilderment to those who knew it by its mobility.

They passed, went on, the old leader and the young—sharply contrasted, and yet as strangely linked—and the soldiers, holding their breath in expectation, still knew not whether to prepare for peace or war. With the utmost slowness, yet moving steadily, Ursan rode through the army with Alvo at his rein; the exercise ground was passed, and in front of them shone the gold spear on the young leader's tent. Before the tent, and on every side of it, a barrier had been erected to keep out intruders; and it was by this barrier, near which were groups of leaders, that the Marvel drew the rein of his horse at length. Alvo dropped his hand, and with the same still, collected manner, offered his shoulder to assist him to dismount; and Ursan dismounting, with a careless touch upon it, for one instant the two men stood side by side. They stood looking on the army with the far-seeing glance of leaders, but without turning their faces to each other; until Alvo moved, and drew slightly to one side with a courteous gesture to the old Marvel. Then Ursan stepped forward, with a salute to the groups of leaders, and Alvo followed him through the barrier. They reached the tent,

paused an instant at its entrance, and the heavy curtain fell upon them both. From that moment the army knew nothing. The leaders waited by the barrier. Within the tent the two Maravels were alone. Breathless with dread, with doubt, and indecision, the army, the leaders, waited in silence for the rest.

XVII.

Lest by base denial. . . .

THEY waited . . . and within the tent they stood together—the leaders who had set out to win the Fair Country, the Maravels who, through long moons, had never met ; until now, at this last instant they were face to face again. Much, indeed, had happened since each had seen the other, much occurred to disturb those who had been united ; this meeting, for which Alvo had longed so feverishly, was taking place under strangest auspices. Yet they had met, and it may be that to both there was something of relief as of dread in the position. It weighed on them still ; for, without speaking, without moving, they spent the first instants of their interview.

Then Alvo stirred. His tent had been prepared ; a space had been cleared, there were embroidered cushions on the ground, and it was towards these that he signed the Maravel, as he came forward to relieve him of his cloak. Ursan submitted to the

fingers at his throat unfastening the silver clasp of his heavy mantle, and, as it dropped from him, sank upon the cushions with the relief natural to an old man's weariness. At the same instant Alvo fell upon his knee, the salute of one who welcomes his superior, and rising, without adding words to his salutation, stood, a slender figure, by the old Maravel. He did not speak, did not look at his companion. Some moments passed in silence, absolute, intense. Then Ursan raised himself slightly on his cushions, and uttered a few words in his harmonious murmur,—

‘Thou art silent?’

Alvo answered with austerity,—

‘I yield the first place to the Maravel of the Rema.’

As he spoke, he did not turn his eyes to his companion, though Ursan's pale glance rested steadily on him. For a moment longer the old Maravel was silent, then his words rushed rapidly, impatiently.

‘Thou and I are not children, Alvo, to come here to scold each other, to say some hot words, and part hastily in a temper. We are men—leaders, the fate of armies hangs upon us—of nations, of thy nation, from which thou art an exile. It is only fit that we should listen to each other, each hearing in silence what the other has to say. If we must part, we will not have the degradation of parting as if

we were drabs or common soldiers. Speak thou. I will listen. Tell me all that is in thy heart. I promise that I will in no way interrupt thee. When thou hast done, it will be my turn to speak, and I expect no less courtesy from thee. I am silent, Alvo, but I can assure thee that I will not lose one word of thine utterances.'

He spoke, and curled himself into his cushions, into the shorter red robe which had been beneath the royal robe; his eyes looking steadily from beneath his heavy brows, if his attitude had its usual carelessness of dignity. He was still, and Alvo stood by his side, motionless, his brows frowning, his eyes looking out into the distance; until, after a while, with the same austerity, the same stillness of manner, he addressed himself to speak. With the words, however, came the passionate vibration which gave his face once more its look of mobility; and his voice, as usual, became deep, clear and rapid, with the quiver like the ring of metal strongly marked. The blood had returned to his face; but if it was passion that possessed him, it was at least passion of which he had not lost control.

'Marvel . . . I have prepared no words for thee. I did not know that thou wouldst condescend to hear me. After all that has happened between us since we parted, I was not ready for so much graciousness. Even now—even now it seems

advisable that I should speak to thee in a kind of figure, for I am afraid that if my words are plain, it may not be easy for me to control them. Listen then, Marvel, and if I seem fantastic, remember that it is easier to be gentle in fantasy.

‘Marvel, thou mayest recollect that one evening long ago—a stormy evening—we were left alone together; and that, amidst some plunder which had been brought that day, we found a few puppets with which we amused ourselves. We set up these puppets, we called them kings and princes, we dressed them as we pleased, and made them speak and move; and to Marvel Alvo, always vain and foolish, the play was a play, and he desired no more. He might have looked out from his playground into life, and have seen how the Marvel of the Rema moved his puppets. I know the game now . . . If thou wilt listen to me, I will tell thee the story of a puppet-leader. It must have been a play that was congenial, since thou hast wasted such thought and pains upon it. Perchance thou wert left for a while without employment, as on the evening when we moved our puppets on the ground.

‘Marvel, this leader, thy puppet, whom thou didst choose to be thy toy, was not a toy without any qualities. Men and women praised it, its movements were admired, in its own wretched

fashion it was even valuable. The better for thee ! Thou didst dress it as a leader, didst surround it with soldiers, and put weapons in its hand—nay, in order that it might be governed by a motive, thou didst hold out before it a dream that was like a country. And so the poor toy, too much of a toy to understand that thy snares surrounded it on every side, took a semblance of life, though in what it thought to be its mind there was rather pride and insanity than wit. Moved by delusions, it fancied itself powerful, able to remonstrate with thee when thou didst vex it. And thou, Maravel, the great king of all the puppets, wert seized with fury against this toy of thy creating. It would have been easy for thee to overthrow it, to topple it over, and leave it in the dust, but to a king of thy wise disposition it seemed contemptible to inflict such slight punishment. Thou didst strike then. The puppet writhed, and thou hadst thy whole desire. All leaders cannot strike so admirably. . . . My story is told, I have but a few more words. If it be thy pleasure let the poor play end at last. . . . Maravel, I have been thy plaything long enough. Strip off the rags now. Throw thy puppet to the dogs !

‘And now I will speak plain words, for I no longer fear myself. From first to last thou hast been always false to me. Thou hast surrounded me with an army whose business was to thwart me,

thou hast kept me without money, hast forbidden me to fight ; in every possible manner, and from every side at once, thou hast never spared to make me contemptible. And that was not enough . . . but I hardly dare remind thee that on thy hands is the blood of one who was my friend . . . I will not speak of it. It is enough that I remember it . . . I am contemptible, but I do not forget. Dost thou think, Maravel, that except for those who serve me, I should have received thee in my tent to-day ?

‘ And so—one last word, which is my word of farewell. Slaves and exiles, Maravel, are wont to have friendless lives. I was friendless. There was a time when I was so lonely, desolate, that thy favour appeared the compassion of a God. I will not ask what it meant. That is now of no consequence. Thou didst show favour to me when I was friendless. I have not forgotten—though I only speak of it because I am never likely to say such words again. In this our last meeting everything should be remembered. I think that I have not forgotten anything. For all, Maravel, that thou hast ever been to me, accept my gratitude—my abhorrence—and farewell.

‘ I have said enough.’

He moved slightly to one side—very slightly, as if only to show that he had done ; and Ursan, who had never ceased to look at him, rose with as quiet

a movement from his place. He stood still; and Alvo, leaning against the high seat of the leader, fell into the attitude of one who listens, his arms hanging quietly, and his features quiet, though, in his turn, his eyes sought his companion.

The wonderful voice of Ursan, unlike that of the young leader, more mellow, softer, more manifold in modulations, filled the tent easily, and compelled attention by its harmonious, enchaining spell. Alvo's eyes rested on his fellow-leader, becoming larger and brighter as he heard. But he said not a word; without moving limbs or features, he listened to his companion, motionless. Without apparently caring for response, Ursan's voice broke the silence steadily.

‘Alvo.

‘I have heard thy speech. I have listened patiently. I have endured every word that thou hast said against me. Now I speak in my turn, and I am well convinced that I am speaking to ears that understand. For I have never, even in thought, placed thee with the other leaders whom I mock and threaten when they come to my tent. Thou art young, but I have ever granted thee the favour of speaking to thee as if thou also wert a leader. That is an honour—even if it is an honour which thou art not able to appreciate.

‘And now, let me ask a question. For what

purpose, dost thou think, did I take thee with me to win the Fair Country? To assist me? Ah, surely thou hast not supposed that I required the assistance of another Maravel! The Fair Country lies in my palm; at any moment that I choose my fingers can close upon it—it is mine. As a pretext, then? But a pretext was not needful. One reason there was—there was only one—I loved thee.

‘I loved thee. Dost thou think those words are meaningless? Dost thou suppose I could say them to another? I have had children—wives; I have had princes under me; I have had leaders to fight in battle by my side. What did I seek in the eyes of everyone, whether it were wife, or child, or prince, or leader? I sought my spirit—mine; I looked into their eyes to see which could answer with the soul of a commander. And I found no answer—no answer till the morning, when I recognised in thy spirit the fire in mine own. What was it to me that thou wert young, inexperienced, if the fire of the Gods was indeed alight in thee?

‘But, thou sayest, “Thou hast betrayed me; with a semblance of friendliness thou hast only sought to entice me to ruin.” It is not *true*; if I tried and tested thee it was only to prove if thou wert fit to be my son. I did not intend—I!—to polish a weapon which should be thrust into mine own breast at last; I would prove thy power, and at the same time that I proved it I

would prove also if thou wert dangerous. And thou—always rash and headstrong!—didst not scruple to offend me, didst blame me, rebuke me, as if thou wert indeed mine equal. And I—I was angry—and I struck in mine anger—and the blow that I struck is still between me and thee. Ah! believe me, Alvo, it will not be to thine advantage to carry thy resentment to the uttermost.

‘What do I offer then?—for I have come here to make an offer—an offer to *thee*, the leader who has opposed me, whom I could crush with the nail of my little finger, whose followers are dead men beneath my hand. I do not say, “Let our alliance be maintained.” I know, as thou knowest, that we cannot work together. We are leaders, but we are men of different nations; we see life together, but with different eyes. I say to thee, therefore: Let us make a fresh alliance—an alliance in which each shall be free on his own path, each one responsible for his own actions, only not free to do harm to the other. . . . And for what has chanced . . . I will not say that I was wrong, I never yet said such words to any man! . . . but I will say that my soldiers were hasty or mistaken, and choose one or other of them for punishment. So much I will do for thee! and I can tell thee that for no other would I bend myself so far. It is for thee to choose—either triumph, victory, or disgrace and death for thyself and thy followers. Choose, then!

One word, one little word to me, and thou hast at once gained thy dream—the Alidrah. I know, as no other man on earth can know, how entirely that one dream has been thy life.

‘Yea, I can say more! I am an old, a lonely man, and some of my children are dead, and some I slew—for what do I care to have sons of my body? it is only sons of my spirit I require. Follow me, and I may do even more for thee than make thee king of thy dream, the Fair Country—The land of the Rema, all my other lands may bend to my son, my heir, when I have gone. Thou wilt not find another—I shall not find another, Alvo—who will be to thee or me what we have both been to each other. Choose, then! I say no more. It lies in thy choice alone to have the old Marvel for friend or enemy. Take time to think for thyself and thy followers. The army may wait our pleasure . . . I have done.’

He ceased; and with the movement of one stirring in a dream, Alvo roused himself from his attitude of listening—his face pale, his hands hanging, his eyes, fixed by agitation, still resting on the face of the Marvel. Without speaking, he made a sign to his companion to signify that he was about to retire to a little distance; and then, turning himself to the seat which he had chosen, he sank down upon it as if all his strength were gone.

He could not see the Maravel, and at that moment (even then!) it occurred to him that his companion might stab him in the back; but the fancy was merely a passing flash of thought, which was not able to have influence. No, if the Maravel had wished to kill him, he would not have wasted on him so many words, for words had been spoken . . . an offer had been made . . . it was necessary for him to make reply. As one crushed, he sat crouching, with his elbows on his knees, his face on his hands, which pressed all their strength against it. Oh! could it be true that it was not in a dream he had heard such an offer from the old Maravel?

Most wonderful! Through these last days of despair he had never doubted that every hope was over, that before himself and the men who followed him lay only death, whether prompt or lingering. And now . . . at the last instant, when hope itself was dead, when in the eyes of all he was a corpse, contemptible . . . at this instant to receive an offer so magnificent that his insanest ambition could never have conceived it! To be released from the yoke which had been a galling bondage, and yet to gain every fruit of the alliance! And without degradation; for *he* was not the suppliant in this final interview with the old Maravel.

So much for pride! He had now to ask himself,

in soberness, seriousness, what he would do ; whether it would be possible to use this interview in order to save his followers from death. Of one thing he was certain—that with Ursan, once rejected, there would be no longer any hope of compromise—if the Marvel must depart unsatisfied, he and his friends must prepare themselves to die. The Nira were hostile, the Exiles would reject him, the Fair Country was his most bitter enemy—turn which way he would, to one side or another, there was not a prospect of safety to be found. For himself he cared little ; but his duty as a leader forbade equal indifference for his followers. And yet—could he stoop to receiving benefits from the man on whose hands he saw the stain of blood ?

Turning from the thought (as all through the interview he had turned away from it lest it should overwhelm him), he asked himself whether it would not be possible to gain security without eternal bondage. In whatever way the Marvel chose to represent his conduct, it was evident that he had been unfaithful to the bond ; and if he himself entered on a temporary friendship, its issue might well be governed by events. The time might come when he would be justified in casting off a yoke assumed for expediency. . . . And then his heart cried,—

‘Ah, fool, even at this moment to match thy cunning with that of the Marvel !’

And yet—and yet his quick reasoning, keen and subtle, reminded him that, through his stormy life as leader, he had held persistently to one principle—the nearest danger must be always faced the first. How often, when he had seemed overwhelmed from every side, had he vanquished the dangers by degrees, and one by one, each action securing just the moment's safety as a foothold from which other danger might be met. Now, at this instant—if he could once gain space for breathing, for the instant saved from Rema, Nira, Alidrah, other opportunities might come with time, so that he could meet his enemies on more equal terms. It came to this—could he, to save his followers, have any dealing with this leader of the Rema? His heart shrank—but it shrank also from condemnation of men who were ready to give their lives for him.

All thoughts rushed at once. An alliance with the Maravel would render him odious to the heart of the Fair Country; but yet—to renounce his claim on the Alidrah was to give the land over to the dominion of the Rema. For the sake of the Alidrah—and still more for his followers, for the men who loved him, gave him their destinies, for the sake of the good which he might yet accomplish—of the dream which had led him onward all his life. . . . His power over Ursan was indisputable, however warped by the old leader's treachery;

he doubted it no more than the devotion of his soldiers, which had always seemed to him saddening, mysterious. If he should use this power. . . . Ah! no doubt the day might come when, in the Silence of the Gods, he would meet reproachful eyes; but then, for the sake of those who depended on him, ought he not to resign himself to this punishment? For their sake—for the sake of his land, the Alidrah—of the old dream whose familiar voice cried out to him. . . . A compelling influence was indeed upon him; and, half mechanically, he turned round on his seat. The movement was towards Ursan; when he had completed it he would be once more at the feet of the leader of the Rema.

And then, as he turned, his eyes fell unconsciously on a familiar corner of his tent, a dark nook to which, in happier, more playful days, he had often condemned his closest companion. He was there now! Seated quietly, with the patience of a dog, his tawny curls clustering closely on his head, his arms round his knees, and his blue, submissive eyes fixed ceaselessly on the movements of his master! Those eyes, so submissive, even to the wretched master who was ready to make terms with his murderer! With a long gasp that was a cry repressed, Alvo clasped his fingers over the eyes that had seen the vision. He did not falter—a mighty hand was on him—it was not

possible to refuse obedience. With a quiet movement he rose up from his seat, and stood quietly, humbly, before the Marvel. Their eyes met. The words that fell from Alvo's lips were so low that they were scarcely audible.

'I cannot.'

'Thou canst not?'

'I cannot, Marvel.'

With a sudden movement Ursan bounded from his cushions. His eyes glittered, his whole face appeared to shine with some strange exultation or malignity.

'Bring the ring,' he cried out, in a sharp, a piercing voice; and Alvo obediently brought the leader's ring—the gilded circle, large as a coronet, on which the names of the leaders were engraved. It was laid on the leader's high seat. Ursan advanced; the men stood opposite each other, with their hands upon the ring. The Marvel took the word; his voice had regained its softness, although it appeared breathless with unflinching hatred. As he pronounced the first sentences Alvo answered by an echo, his low voice filling the pauses quietly.

'Our league is broken.'

'It is broken,' Alvo said.

'I will give thee no more assistance.'

'No more assistance.'

'I am the friend of thine enemies. I am the enemy of thy friends. I will not scheme for thee

in peace ; I will not fight for thee in battle. When thou art thirsty I will give thee no water ; when thou art on fire I will not quench the flames. When thou liest in death upon the battle-field I will leave thee to be trodden down by enemies. No promise unites us, no friendship, no alliance—my Gods shall not fight for thee, nor thine for me. As I take this circle and break it with my hands, so let all be broken that was ever thine and mine !’

He took the circle, broke it, flung it down and trode on it ; then, with the same imperious motion, turned away ; Alvo following him with a manner quiet, humble, the humility of unchanging resolution. Paying no attention to him, Ursan stretched his hand to his robe ; but, as he took it, the clasp dropped to the ground, and with a mechanical movement, due to his habitual courtesy, Alvo bent down on one knee to pick it up. Even as he did so, the old Maravel’s manner changed—with a hasty step he crossed to the young leader, and with one hand on his shoulder retained him in his position, whilst with the other he pressed the thin face to his breast. His hand moved ; with a motion tender and caressing it lay on the thin cheek, the forehead, on the lips. A few words broke from him irresistibly, as if inward passion compelled their utterance.

‘ Alvo—Alvo—thou hast so many enemies !’

His hand dropped, and Alvo rose up from his

knee, with the clasp in his hand, and with a face pale as death ; and without uttering a word, in the same still, collected manner, placed the robe on the shoulders of the Marvel. Doubtless, Ursan repented of his moment's weakness, for, as he went on speaking, his voice was strangely altered ; it had an undertone like a serpent's hiss, whilst his face wore the gloating look of malignity.

‘ The Nira,’ he said, ‘ who burn those they dislike ; the people of the Fair Country, who make sacrifices ; the Karngría, who pour hot oil on pretty faces, which they have torn open for the purpose with their knives. The races of the mountains—the races of the plains—the Exiles themselves—’ he paused with the last word.

Alvo's voice interrupted quietly, soberly, but still with the sound of an interrogation.

‘ And if these should fail—the Marvel of the Rema ?’

‘ He will not be needed,’ cried Ursan, laughing softly. But he added in a lower voice,—‘ He will do all that is required.’

And as if with these last words everything were said, he put out his hand that Alvo might lead him from the tent.

Side by side they went through it ; but as they reached the entrance, Alvo dropped the hand of the Marvel respectfully, and falling behind him with a deep salute, permitted him to go first into the

camp. They came out from darkness into evening sunshine, whose rosy glow flooded an animating scene—the weapons and standards of the ranks of soldiers stretching far away to the marshes in the distance. All eyes were upon them, as, one after the other, they advanced with slow paces and looks of resolution. No signs seemed to tell of an approaching contest, but yet all knew that the young leader's doom was sealed. For one moment a sensation, overwhelming, universal, held the breath alike of his friends and enemies.

XVIII.

Farewell ! a long farewell.

ALL ceremonies were not over. It still was necessary for Alvo to take leave of the departing soldiers, a formal office, reckoned indispensable alike by the Rema and the Alidrah. For this purpose he stationed himself on the rising ground from which he was accustomed to address his army ; a clear space being in front of him, so that it was possible for the troops to defile past him in regular array. Urgan stood at a little distance, amidst a band of his own leaders, for Rudol and Iscar, with others, were now in the camp—the other leaders, whether Rema or otherwise, being sufficiently occupied by the ceremony. It was not an easy one to arrange in order, for difficult questions of precedence arose which, but for the presence of the two chief Maravels, would hardly have been settled without the aid of combat. By the help of Osmyn, however, which he exerted strenuously, aided by the wisest of the Rema leaders, all was slowly settled ; and in

the failing evening light the departing soldiers began to move in order. Each section appeared in turn, and its leader, walking first, turned, as he passed, to the young Maravel. An imposing ceremony to which, as soon appeared, the occasion lent dramatic interest.

Alas! the young leader had been well known to his army, and to every leader had been known personally; there being scarcely one of the leaders in the camp who had not experienced some courtesy from him. He might have supposed that at this instant of departure he would be greeted with reverence, if not regret; that even the most hostile would be satisfied with his position, and would not seek to embitter the occasion of his fall. The disposition to give him parting insults must have come with a shock even to his experience, well used as he had been through his stormy life to the changeableness, the ingratitude of men. It would not be fair, however, to ascribe the conduct of the soldiers altogether and entirely to ingratitude; for many causes moved them, like the muddy elements which rise in water when it has once been stirred. The strange fascination which the young leader exercised was one not without its reverse side of stranger hatred; there were many who had resented his severity, and many more who had envied his success. Bitterness also had risen in the army between the numbers who went, the few who

stayed—and finally it must be remembered that this parting ceremony took place in the presence of the old Maravel. These reasons may account for (they cannot justify) the conduct of most of the Maravels and soldiers, in whose barbarian natures at that moment the baser elements had risen to the surface. As the leaders passed before Alvo, some of them turned away their heads, some spat, some grimaced, some gave hesitating salutes; each expressing in his own manner, and according to his strength of purpose, the hatred or timidity that governed him. They passed; and to each man in turn, and to every man alike—alike to the leader who saluted, and the leader who insulted him—Alvo gave, without change of face, his grave salute, as mechanically as if he were an automaton. He stood before them, slender, upright, motionless, save only for the necessary motion of salute; his grave eyes resting on every man in turn, as in turn leader after leader passed before him. If he were wounded, humiliated, if this ceremony crowned the day with bitterness, his experience had at least given him so much control that his face had only a look of gravity. It was pale, however, and without any animation, absorbed into quiet lines and seriousness.

The army passed by. These few words of description may serve to paint the general conduct of the leaders, but it must not be supposed that

in all that multitude there were no variations of behaviour to be found. As to the soldiers, whose perpetual, steady tramp made monotonous echoes in the evening stillness, they sometimes copied the demeanour of their leaders, but for the most part passed by with averted heads. It only remains to notice the differences which varied the sombre procession here and there. For now and then some Maravel, more individual than the rest, impressed his own disposition on the scene.

The first surprise was occasioned by the young Karngri prince, who, in spite of the alliance of his nation with the Rema, had evidently determined that, in this moment of farewell, he would not be ungenerous to a fallen leader. In his anxiety to show that he saluted, he bent himself almost double, with an exaggerated movement, an action which his soldiers did not attempt to copy, and which they appeared to view with much disdain. For one instant the eyes of Alvo followed him, but the leader gave no other sign of interest.

The Karngria passed first. They were succeeded in due turn by the Gortona, the Helos, and the Effar—savage nations all, whose conduct in that day of reckoning did not rise above their ordinary savageness. The poor giant, however, who had on one occasion been a rebel, the two leaders who had been convicted of drunkenness, saluted mournfully, with some appearance of affec-

tion, heedless of the contempt of their companions. And here and there, amongst the soldiers or the leaders, there might be found some individual who saluted. The behaviour of the rest has been already indicated—it varied from passive insults to active ones.

And now came the turn of the Rema, of whom, as has been said, at least half of the whole army was composed, of whose feeling against the young leader no man doubted, and who were therefore awaited with eagerness. First marched the leader whom we have seen more than once, the friend of the Karngria prince, the youngest Rema Maravel ; and, to the amazement of all, as he passed Alvo, he bestowed upon him a short, stiff salute. More wonderful still ! his men followed his example, although with the most evident unwillingness—thus evidencing that, more happy than his friend, he had absolutely been able to enforce obedience. His example did much—doubtless more than he expected. It commenced the Rema march in a sober spirit ; and, indeed, though both soldiers and leaders showed disdain, their conduct compared favourably with other tribes. It may be, however, that the insolent Rema bearing—the uplifted heads, and general look of triumph—was as hard to bear, perchance more hard to bear, than the greater brutality displayed by others. Masters of the position as they knew themselves to be, it was not likely

that they would disguise their feelings ; and from their whole multitude, with one exception, there was not a single salute after the first division passed. The exception, however, was curious. From the ranks of common soldiers a man sprang suddenly, and flung himself at Alvo's feet. In the general amazement with which the action was attended, all the soldiers stood still that they might hear what he had to say.

‘ I have to thank thee, Maravel, for teaching me my exercises.’

‘ Tell thy master,’ Alvo answered, moved for the first time—for his lip trembled—‘ that I never taught them to a better soldier.’

The words were passed on to Ursan, who seemed to hear with interest, and the march of the Rema continued as before.

It was nearly over when there occurred a circumstance such as the wiser spirits had been dreading all the time—one of those chance sparks which may be of no importance, but, on the other hand, may raise a conflagration. As the Rema passed, the last of them turned his head, flinging back a coarse word to the Kroni and Nira who remained—a Kroni leaped from the ranks—their long knives were drawn—in another instant they would have rushed upon each other. Instinctively Alvo sprang forward ; and the Rema, who was excited, struck wildly at him, hardly

knowing what he did, so that Iscar, who had sprung from the side of Ursan, and thrust himself between, was wounded in the shoulder. Confused by the fact that it was a Rema who was injured, both of the combatants let their weapons fall ; and those who desired peace laying hold of them, they were thrust back into the ranks of their companions. With his usual indifference, Iscar stood still where he was, although blood was falling from his wounded shoulder ; and with a face quivering with gratitude Alvo came hastily, as if he would embrace him. Then Iscar lifted his head, and in the eyes drawn beneath his brows the long-repressed hatred and envy shone at last.

‘ Maravel, I have paid thee the blood thou hast shed for me, and am now at last able to speak honestly. I rejoice in this day. I have been long convinced that thy exaltation could have no other end. Go on to death, Maravel. Thy country hates thee. I will wait with it for thy punishment.’

Alvo did not reply. His dark eyes were fixed on the distance, his face and hands trembled as if he were in pain—through the whole course of that long day of probation he had never once been so nearly overwhelmed. He had saved this man’s life ! alone, almost unarmed, he had flung himself between this man and his enemies ! and the benefit had been only remembered as a burden, thrown off joyfully that he might be taunted in his fall !

For one instant he stood still in the evening light, with blank, staring eyes, as if he had lost consciousness ; but distant sounds roused him, and instantly on the alert, the leader's keenness returned to his eyes again. The tumult proceeded from the ranks of Rema soldiers, who had discovered that their number was not complete. For one moment Alvo was anxious, but his anxiety disappeared as his quick ears caught the name the soldiers shouted.

‘Lipsus ! Lipsus !’

The word recalled the envoy, whom Alvo had sent that morning to the Rema—good-naturedly, for it had occurred to him that Ursan might be displeased to find Lipsus in his tent. He remembered now that he had been told that morning of a friendly message sent by Ursan to the hostage—assuring him that the Maravel was contented with his conduct, and that he might expect promotion when he returned. So much the better ! since, from the midst of his own troubles, Alvo could spare a good-natured thought for Lipsus ; and was even anxious lest, by this dilatory conduct, the envoy should be endangering his promotion. The shouts, however, were speedily successful, for the figure of Lipsus became visible, walking slowly in the clear space between the armies, with his head bent, as if he were alone and lost in thought. At that moment the Nira, and the band of Exiles, had arranged themselves between their leader and his

tent ; they stood behind Alvo—Ursan was on one side of him—immediately before him were the ranks of Rema soldiers. A vivid scene in the glowing evening light — the dark armies, the weapons and uplifted standards ; in the midst of the whole, the little form of Lipsus, with his buckler of hard leather, and his enormous hatchet. Had he considered what he was going to do ? Did he even in that moment know what he would say ? Possibly he did not, yet with no want of resolution he faced the soldiers who were his countrymen.

‘ I shall stay here.’

For a moment there was silence—a silence of amazement, almost of consternation ; but the face of Lipsus displayed no indecision, though his fingers clutched the handle of his hatchet. It was not in his nature to think of consequences—he had not done so when he had saved the helpless women ; or when he had risked his credit with his leaders that he might hold water to Ivlon’s burning lips. Steadily, with his narrow glance upon his comrades, he addressed them in his usual sententious manner. The Rema assurance, which he shared with his nation, was a quality which at that instant served him well.

‘ The young leader has fought for the Rema,’ Lipsus said. ‘ It is right that one Rema should stay to make up the Ninety.’

The words were received with a storm of execra-

tion ; but as Ursan advanced a pace all sounds were hushed.

‘ It gives me pleasure,’ said the Maravel’s mellow voice, ‘ to leave this parting gift with my brother-leader. This prison-bird came from his cage to be a hostage ; no doubt he is not anxious to return.’

The mutter of opposition, like the rising of the sea, rose at the same instant from the Ninety and the Rema ; whilst Lipsus stood in the midst, shivering in spite of courage—as it seemed, a disdained gift whom every man rejected. But Alvo’s face glowed, and his dark eyes were shining as he made a step forward to his new ally. His voice rose in its clear vibrating tones as his hand touched the shoulder of the Rema envoy.

‘ I accept thy gift, Maravel,’ he said, courteously. ‘ I believe that thou couldst not bestow a better present.’

He looked at Osmyn, who, understanding his desire, drew Lipsus on one side, and stood near him to protect him. The murmurs of rage and suspicion died away. A fresh expectation held the breath of all. The moment had come for the parting of the leaders.

It had come. The evening glow lay in crimson tints—there was evening silence—the soldiers were motionless. They stood in their ranks, all eyes with one consent on the bare spot of ground which was unoccupied. Then Ursan moved—Alvo—

they moved towards each other ; they stood still between the armies, face to face. And all at once Ursan flung out both his arms, and bent as if he would make his forehead touch the ground.

‘ Ah, my brother Maravel ! my brother Maravel ! ’ he cried, and the joyous mockery of his tone rang through the camp. The Rema soldiers, who had been waiting for his example, let their loud shouts of laughter rend the air. Blood flew to Alvo’s face, but he stood there, upright, silent, without moving until his companion raised his head. Then he looked into his companion’s eyes ; and said, coldly, slowly,—

‘ I give thee farewell, Maravel.’

Ursan moved ; and the instant that he turned the whole army began to set itself in motion. Alvo also moved, signed to Osmyn to take his place, and turned away abruptly to his own ranks of soldiers. Perhaps he had at last reached the limit of endurance, and discovered that even he could bear no more. He passed through his soldiers, who silently made way, and in another instant his tent-curtain fell behind him. With the last light the army set itself in order, and the tramp of footsteps began to leave the camp. In the place where one keen will had ruled supreme, there was now only the sound of departure to be heard.

Later that night, when the full moon had risen,

when strange shadows fell from the hills, vivid light upon the streams, on a dark ridge above the young leader's camp, two horsemen lingered to look down on the tents. Ursan had sent his army on before him ; and now waited with only Rudol by his side—Rudol, eager, trembling, even yet not satisfied, because vengeance is harder to satisfy than love. Long waited the Maravel, although his companion was impatient—long stayed there motionless, leaning forward, looking down, whilst the plain and marshes slept in silver radiance, and lights rose here and there amongst the dark tents of the camp. At last he moved, raising his head with a slow motion, and his hand closed on the bridle of his horse.

‘ It was his fault,’ he said.

And he rode away.

THE REVENGE OF THE FAIR
COUNTRY.

And they shall deal with thee hatefully.

Wisdom crieth without,—

‘Because I have called, and ye refused. . . . I also will laugh at your calamity ; I will mock when your fear cometh.’

Last, as by some one deathbed after wail
Of suffering, silence follows.

X I X.

In the night season.

Ich bin viel
Gehasset worden, doch auch viel geliebt !

ALVO was alone. The tent curtain had closed upon him ; he had thrown himself down on the ground among the cushions ; outside was the noise of the camp, near him lay the broken ring. His hands clasped his head, but he was absolutely still, not even listening to the movements in the camp ; he had secured the entrance to his tent, that, if possible, his solitude might be undisturbed. He would rest now. It was a long while since he rested. But he could allow himself some rest at last.

He hid his face in his arms that tears might come. They came easily, as they had never done before. There was no need that he should ask himself for what reason or for whose sake he was grieved. It was enough that he was relieved. An old remembrance returned . . . he was once more

the slave who knelt before his master ; a taunting word hurt him . . . and again the tears broke out as if he were acting the very scene again. Ah ! it was *true*, the mockery was true, it was not through him that the Exiles would return. His dream was over. And, now that it was over, it seemed that he could scarcely even grieve for it.

He raised himself on his cushions, heaping them against the pole, and lying against it in a half-raised attitude, with one arm flung over his head, and his eyelashes still wet, like a child who has cried itself into wistfulness. What were they doing outside ? . . . In a little while he must be strong, must resume the leader, and take thought for his men. . . . Ah ! he would rest now ; before he thought for them he would allow a few moments for himself. Through what a day he had passed ! Surely he might pause for a moment now that he had really reached an end at last.

For this was an end. He did not deceive himself. Before himself and his men a grave was open ; enemies surrounded them on every side, and one supreme enemy rested in the rear. He might extricate them from immediate difficulty—his skill was still keen enough for the moment's danger—but to what purpose should he gain an instant's safety, convinced as his soul was of its uselessness ? The Maravel of the Rema might spare him a little while, but it would be only for a little while. And

yet he must struggle onwards to the end, not for himself but for his followers.

Many visions haunted him. He was a boy climbing on the mountains ; a horror-struck fugitive flying from the priests ; a slave, for the first time conscious of his beauty, whilst hearing on all sides that it was valuable. What golden dreams he had known ! and how many gifts he had proved ! ambition, beauty, a leader's skill and talent ; not least, the mysterious, inexplicable power by which he had swayed the hearts and wills of men. And all to no purpose—he remained a failure, whilst others, without his gifts, had won success. He might struggle still, but only from the fever which forbade him any quiet but the grave.

A false step haunted him. He recalled the night when he had lain in the dark wood, fighting with himself—only that the next morning, as one drawn to doom, he might hasten to the tent of the old Maravel. Ah ! no doubt the step had been irresistible ; it had been in his nature ; he could not have escaped ; but only because his own ambition, vanity—his own folly, recklessness, had paved the way. Fool that he was, he had kept himself scrupulously clean from the licence and crimes that stained the Rema leaders ; and yet had not so trained his vision as to know what must result when he allied himself with evil. And even to-day he had wavered ! and, if he had yielded a second

time, the result, after an interval, must have been the same ; for he might as well hope to move mountains, dry the ocean, as drain perfidiousness from the old Maravel. No ! he had failed . . . he had done wrong, had been punished . . . it remained for him to receive punishment with patience ; his heart should be as one who, condemned to death, lies down that he may bear all pain patiently. . . . He would fight for his men. He had fought only for himself. He had been moved by dreams for himself as king, as leader. Now, he would fight for his men. If the Gods would only be content to let the leader bear death for all the rest !

He sat upon the cushions, pressing both hands on his eyes, absorbed by sensations of rest, quietness ; until at last he took the gold charm from his breast, and kissed it softly, as one who devotes himself. Now he would work ! He would send a message to the Exiles. He would attack the Nira before the night was over. His dreams were ended. But he no longer cared for dreams. Hopes and dreams lost their power . . . when Ivlon died. He would fight on until the moment came when in the Silence he might meet his friend again . . . Rising to his feet, he lit the silver lamp, fastened it to the pole, and set his tent in order ; moving without haste, but with his accustomed care, until all about him wore its

wonted look. This task completed, he took out his tablets, and sat down to write by the light of the silver lamp ; the words coming slowly, but without pause or effort, as if they arranged and even wrote themselves. How short a while since it would have hurt his pride to address these despairing words to the men who had despised him ! And now he could feel a certain satisfaction, grave, serious, not altogether without sweetness. If they would accept this proposal ! but, even if it was rejected, it would at least comfort him to have offered it.

‘ I, Alvo, am writing to you, my fellow-Exiles, to announce that there is no longer alliance between myself and Maravel Urgan. With the soldiers who remain I am attacking the Nira army. It is to their camp that you must despatch your answer.

‘ This is my proposal. I invite you to send to the Alidrah, and make terms with its rulers, offering my body as the price. I only require that, in any treaty, the lives of all who have followed me shall be respected.

‘ I have failed in my attempt, and, except in the way of which I speak, there is no other hope of deliverance. Only, I beseech you, let no share in my condemnation fall upon men who have no fault, save that they have been too faithful to me.

‘ I, Alvo, write this.’

He smiled as he concluded, and secured the message with his usual care ; then, with the same grave and collected manner, rose quietly and went to the entrance of his tent. Osmyn, who was waiting, came to him at once, and listened to the brief whispers of his master ; then departed that he might fulfil immediate orders whilst Alvo was receiving his latest follower. In a little while the whole camp would be astir, and its leader in utmost need of all his powers. Perchance he was feeling in some want of support, and could not afford to neglect any faithfulness.

.
Lipsus entered slowly. He came humbly forward, hugging his great hatchet, and saluted the Marvel. Then he stood before him with bent head, expecting orders, with both hands clasping his hatchet to his breast. At first Alvo did not speak, but stood leaning against the pole, looking at the soldier with dark, attentive eyes. Then, coming close, he laid a hand on either shoulder, still looking steadily at him, but without a word. Lipsus submitted to this scrutiny for a while, but at length imagined that it was time to speak. His words were uttered in the reproving tone of one who reminds another of forgetfulness.

‘Thou has sent for me, Marvel.’

‘I have sent for thee.’ Alvo smiled faintly, for he detected the reproof. ‘I wish to speak to thee,

and I am sorry that on this busy night I have so little time.' He let his hands fall, but he still looked at his companion. 'Thou hast come to me?'

His voice was grave and gentle.

'I have come, Marvel.' (Lipsus had understood that the words did not refer to his presence but his decision.) 'What am I to do?'

His question of few words comprehended everything that he wished to know. Alvo did not answer, but, by a hand upon his arm, drew him gently down to one of the low seats in the tent. Even then he paused for a while before he spoke, and his words only came with difficulty.

'Lipsus,' he said, 'thou hast given up everything—thy country, thy master, even thy life. What can I offer thee? Thou hast given everything. Hast thou no fear that thou wilt regret thy choice? It may not even now be too late . . .'

'It is too late, Marvel.'

'But—thou dost not regret?'

'I shall be with thee, Marvel.'

The words came before he knew. Rema soldier though he was, his face became hot, and his narrow eyes were burning. Alvo turned away his head, but not before the Rema had been able to see the bitter movement of his lips. His words came passionately.

'I am not worth so much.'

‘It is for me to judge, Marvel.’

Lipsus spoke in reproofing tones. Alvo was silent for a moment, and then rose to his feet. No doubt he felt that there was no further use in discussing an irrevocable decision.

‘Thou hast come,’ he said. ‘I will do what I can for thee. There will be a battle to-night. I will keep thee at my side. I accept thee for my soldier.’

He stooped gravely, with dignity, and touched with his lips the forehead of the Rema. Then, muttering that he would shortly send for him, he took him by the shoulders, and turned him from the tent. At the same instant Osmyn entered; and with a formal, grave salute, the Rema soldier went out into the camp. His decision was sealed, and it was with a steadfast heart that he stood alone in the night, beneath the stars.

‘Osmyn,’ cried Alvo, ‘we must fight to-night!’

The young leader had thrown himself on his seat again. He turned up his face towards his follower with his old expression of wayward gaiety. With an anxiety that he did not conceal, Osmyn looked down into the brown dancing eyes. It was a long while, it seemed to be a lifetime, since he had been vexed by his master’s playfulness.

‘Hast thou told them?’

‘Yes, Estri. I have given orders through the

camp that all the soldiers must be prepared to march to-night. What wilt thou do ? ’

‘ I mean to attack the Nira. ’

‘ They have multitudes, Estri, and we have not more than three hundred. We have not time to reach them. ’

‘ I tell thee we shall have time if we direct our course through the centre of the marsh. I know these marshes . . . What wouldst thou have me do ? Shall we stay here that we may be attacked and then be killed ? We must surprise them. I am not afraid of anything now that I know my followers are faithful . . . Art afraid, Osmyn ? ’

‘ Yes, Estri. ’

Alvo laughed, his eyes becoming browner and more sparkling every instant.

‘ We shall have the excitement. It is not all of us who can be always as grim and grave as thou. ’

‘ It is those who have little strength, Estri, who depend upon excitement. ’

‘ Ah, do not stab me, ’ cried Alvo. ‘ I have been stabbed so many times to-day. Osmyn, this is the end. I know it is the end. The Maravel of the Rema will not leave us life much longer. Let us fight to the last ! Even when I was a child it was always my fancy to play the lost game out. I have nothing left but my men. I will fight for them, for thee, Osmyn, my best, most trusted friend . . . perchance for one other to whom I must be grat-

ful because he gave water once to one I loved. Come with me, Osmyn. If it were of any use I would tell thee to let me go to ruin alone.'

'It would be useless, Estri.'

'I know it,' Alvo said. He rose from his seat, and took hold of Osmyn's shoulder. 'Let us go to the soldiers.' For one moment he was silent. Then he muttered below his breath, 'If I am hated, I am loved! Come with me, Osmyn.'

They went out into the camp. A few minutes later the piercing sound of trumpets gathered before the leader the few soldiers who were left.

Did any of those soldiers forget, through all their lives, the strange consultation held that night beneath the stars—the great, empty camp, the marshes dim with night, the yellow moon hanging low above the marshes, the face of Alvo as he stood in front of them with the flickering, red light of a torch behind him? All was settled rapidly—a few soldiers were told off to guard the horses, the baggage of the camp, and the rest were arranged in order, each division with its captain, to follow the gold spear of the leader through the marsh. There was no time to think of peril—the marshes, dangerous at night, the multitudes awaiting them in the Nira camp—the rapidity of Alvo and his determination swept the three hundred as one man along with him. If the young leader's case were desperate, he had at least some power of

desperate action left. From the midst of the gulf to which he had brought his followers he would strike one blow for honour, if it might not be for life.

XX.

. . . Till hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates.

ONE we know feared danger. Olbri had gone to rest that night with a mind anxious and ill-satisfied, anxious for the future, dismayed at the laxity which was prevailing more and more amongst the Nira. He had been delivering messages for Celius, and had ventured to add some warnings of his own ; for, since he had been considered supernatural, his credit had grown and he had become of real importance. To more than one leader he had intimated that the young Maravel was not far away, that his apparent inactivity might be a stratagem, and that it could do no harm to secure the camp. Returning at nightfall to the tent of Celius, and pondering on the indifference with which his warnings were received, his mind was full of the mysterious intimations by which a keen sense perceives approaching danger. It was of danger he thought as he lay down to rest, but his fears became lost by degrees

in soothing dreams—the misery and horror of the last year slipped away, and he stood with Ascar on the Escola. Only not alone, for one other stood with them—Ered, who had once been there alone with him, linked now with both in intimate communion, her warning eyes fixed not on Ascar but himself. From the joy of that union, the unutterable peace with which he recognised that he was once more with his friends, he stirred at first faintly, aware that he was called, but unwilling to move lest the dream should pass away. Then he started up. Celius was standing by his side—Celius, who had not been in the tent when he returned—half-armed, distraught, whilst from the camp without came a glare of light and the rush of multitudes. The voice of Celius, breaking in on his confusion, supplied the meaning that glare and sound conveyed.

‘Olbri, wake! The young leader is here!’

Olbri started to his feet, and, seizing garments and weapons, began to clothe and arm himself; whilst the Nira leader, astonished at his promptness, poured out his tale of horror and bewilderment. Alvo was come! was come with multitudes—the camp had in a moment been surprised and overwhelmed—the soldiers were flying in every conceivable direction, and it was impossible to control or gather them. Before he had finished, Olbri was clothed and armed, looking at him with

a pale face and smiling eyes, from which not even the distorting scar could rob the calmness and audacity. Celius had never seen his companion in a moment when imminent danger called for help; and although he had already learned to trust him he was not less impressed by a sense of power.

‘So the moment has come,’ cried Olbri, ‘to which I have so long looked forward! I shall meet Alvo on the battle-field!’

‘What wilt thou do? They have set the tents on fire. Our men are scattered. It is not possible to collect them.’

‘Only come with me!’

And with bright face, flashing weapon, Olbri rushed from the tent of Celius to the camp. In the midst of horror, unspeakable confusion, the blazing tents, dark forms of flying soldiers, his voice rose high, keen and piercing as a weapon that drives through darkness to the very hearts of men.

‘Where is this Alvo? Let him come and stand before me. I dare to call myself as good a man as he! Gather together. There is no need to fear this army. Only leave the young leader that I may fight with him.’

A voice that had power! Through the darkness, the confusion, the horror of blazing tents, of helpless terror, the Nira soldiers became aware of Olbri, and stayed their flight as if they had heard

a leader's call. The strange reputation of the son of Olloto, the demoniacal fame with which he was invested, his piercing voice, even his distorted face, appealed like magic to their insanity.

'Where is Alvo?' Olbri kept crying, and the sound of the repeated question came like fresh blood to men unnerved with terror; since, even in their ranks, it was possible for one to be found who dared to face the fiend. Fiend against fiend! They had only to be still, and let the powers of darkness fight each other! The fight was stayed; there was some attempt at order; it might yet be possible to save the camp.

Meanwhile. . . . Afraid of some fresh outbreak of terror, Olbri had rushed through the ranks, crying out the name of Alvo; and from all sides the cry of 'Alvo' answered him, and yet it was impossible to discover the young leader. The darkness before dawn, on which Alvo had relied to hide the insignificant number of his forces, still hung like a pall on the camp, made more bewildering by flames, and men scarcely knew their friends from enemies. The attack came from all sides, and it was only natural to suppose the host of enemies innumerable; whilst the fresh life perpetually darted into it made the leader's own presence appear to be universal. Leaving Celius to arrange the forces, followed only by a few, Olbri rushed to the outposts to seek the young leader there;

rushed from place to place, crying loudly upon Alvo, half-inclined to believe the leader's presence a delusion. Blows were given, received in darkness, but he neither gave them nor received ; he bore a charmed life in the midst of enemies—his followers dropped from him, and he was left alone, but still he went onward, crying out on Alvo. Aware at last that he was entirely alone, left by himself, almost outside the camp, he turned that he might get back to Celius and the soldiers, or at least to the noise of battle raging at some distance from him. He had reached a place where the ground sank naturally, forming a natural trench which had been used for the defences ; above him were the tents of the camp, and upon the other side a low wall on the rising ground formed its boundary. As he stood looking upwards he became suddenly aware of a solitary figure like a shadow on the wall, which dropped into the trench by his side before he had time to notice whether this were the form of a friend or enemy. At the same instant a brand flung amongst the tents took effect, and flames leaped up in long lines of light—the men saw each other, and as one possessed by dreams Olbri became conscious of the young leader's face. Strange ! to miss him in battle, and now, unexpectedly, to find himself face to face with him, and alone ! Once more, from the mass of human destinies, the sorcerer's son had met the sorcerer.

The men looked at each other. Quick-nerved, and keen as steel, their minds had seized the situation in an instant, and already upon each face, white and drawn, there was the look of an approaching mortal conflict. By one, indeed, it was not to be escaped ; like an animal in a trap, Alvo was without any means of refuge. The trench, which sloped gently from his antagonist, rose steeply behind him, so that he could not have retreated. The ground, too, beneath his feet was moist and heavy, so that water had spirted as he sprang upon it ; and no soldiers were near him, for in his rapid movements he had been careless whether or not he was accompanied. He found himself therefore reduced to a position in which every advantage was with his antagonist ; and yet, though in danger, and conscious of his danger, he was able to recognise Olbri with a smile. Through Olbri, on his part, although through every pulse there thrilled the consciousness that he was face to face with Alvo, there rose also, like a flash of illuminating knowledge, the sense that the advantage of position was his own. He was meeting this leader, this terror of the Alidrah, on terms which favoured himself, not his enemy ; and he was himself quick, keen in time of danger beyond every other man he had ever known. There was little time in that single, breathless instant, for him to remember that this man had spared his life ; yet the thought did touch him with the mysterious

strength of one who can kill, but not hate his enemy. By the light of the flaming tents the men looked upon each other. It fell full on Alvo, leaving Olbri's face in shadow; their faces were uncovered, but one had sword, the other battle-axe, and against the side of Alvo a long Rema knife was shining. Alvo looked as he looked in combat, his eyes bright, his lips controlled, every sense made keen by the consciousness of danger, master of his movements, so that he could be defensive, waiting for a mistake from his antagonist. In spite of himself, in spite of all his courage, of all his scepticism, his audacity, Olbri felt his heart fail, felt the mist before his eyes, which in such a moment could mean no less than death.

‘Estri. By the Gods!’ he cried, the entreaty for a moment's preparation permitted to those who engage in mortal conflict.

And Alvo let his arms sink and remained in careless attitude, leaning against the ground which rose behind him. Olbri drew a long breath, the dim mist left his eyes, and phantom visions began to encompass him—Ascar, Ered, his dead father, the maiden who had pity, all waiting for him to prove his manliness. One moment nerved him, he resumed his former attitude, and through his fibres there poured the strength of battle; whilst Alvo, on his part, drew himself together, his bright, watching glance on his antagonist. They looked at each

other. The young leader's sword was short, and already the ground began to sink beneath his feet. Still they looked, they breathed hard. When conflict had begun, a single instant might decide for life or death.

Olbri stirred. As he did so, Alvo made a rapid movement, anxious, if possible, to be on firmer ground; but the motion disturbed the swamp beneath his feet, and he sank into it almost to the knee. With one of those movements of which he alone was capable, he tore himself from the quagmire with a spring; but before he was able to regain his footing, the axe of Olbri had struck the sword from his hand. They stood before each other, Alvo grasping his small shield, and with his other hand on the Rema knife. Olbri panted. Now! He raised his axe for a mighty blow, and the small shield of Alvo was cleft from end to end. As the blow fell, Alvo sprang, he was on his antagonist—Olbri shortened his grasp upon his battle-axe—but as he did so the shield slipped from his breast, and in an instant Alvo's knife had pierced his heart. Olbri fell dead without a word, without a breath, and a cry of horror rose from the blazing tents; for the Nira had assembled, and in that final instant had seen the contest and the fall of their champion. Peril always nerved Alvo to appalling audacity; he sprang up the slope with no other weapon than his knife; and crying, 'I am Alvo!'

defenceless as he was, he drove his way through them, and they fled before him. In another moment the leader found himself enclosed in the ranks of his own followers; who only that instant conscious of his danger, had hastened in agony to succour him. Panting and breathless, Alvo leaned on Osmyn's shoulder, his eyes and lips laughing as if he were possessed; then shook his knife, crying out to the soldiers round him,—

‘Make haste! We must win the camp before the dawn!’

He gathered them together with the extraordinary skill which co-existed with his foolhardiness; and before the first rays of the first sunbeam pierced the clouds, the Nira were flying over the marsh in all directions. The desperate adventure the young leader undertook had been crowned with the most absolute, most complete success—deserted by Ursan and Ursan's followers, he had been able to win this battle by himself! It might prove a short-lived triumph, but at least he had become possessed of horses, baggage, tents, the Nira camp; and he had strengthened the mysterious renown which had often succoured him in adversity. Let evil advance! even if it overwhelmed him, it would find him not altogether without honour. With greater confidence, a more certain strength, he secured his position, and waited for the rest.

And Olbri? Before another night had fallen, a band of Nira had entered the camp, unarmed; and, safe under the gracious permission of the leader, had borne away a dead body from the field. For it was not fit that the hero of the hour, the only man who had dared to face the fiend, the leader of a moment who had stayed the army's flight, should be left to be buried by the enemy. It was the will of Celius, who himself came with the band, that his companion, for whom he mourned honestly, should be embalmed, in order that his corpse might be buried with honours in the Alidrah. The poor broken life, which men had scourged, and hunted, which they had accused, branded, banished, persecuted, safe now from their power, was the fit recipient of those strange favours which men heap upon the dead. Olbri lay on his bier, and his uncovered face was turned to the sky, which on that night burned with stars—the stars he had promised to reach, and to which it was possible that his wandering feet had really found a way. He was embalmed, taken to the Alidrah, and buried there with state and ceremony—laid near his father, that the name of Olloto might be considered to receive honour with his own. The son of the sorcerer, the friend of Estri Ascar, the opponent of Alvo, slept in peace at length. Others we know, not so soon released from labour, were left to fight out the battle to the end.

X X I.

Nightshade with the woodbine kissing ;
Serpents in red roses hissing.

IF they fight ! In a palace of the Alidrah a young man is wandering with uncertain steps, his hands, lips twitching, and every attitude betokening one whom restless doubt torments. All round him are signs of wealth and luxury, costly hangings, mosaics, the riches of the nobles—but at this instant the familiar wealth supplies no comfort which can avail to help him. Estri Envar has come back from the Council where, as chief noble, he had been treated with respect, has sat in the principal seat, been consulted and caressed, addressed with phrases, and greeted with salutes. He has returned to feel that in this moment of decision (for the Alidrah has reached a moment of decision) there is no voice held in so much contempt, no opinion so absolutely powerless as his own. The country is deciding—Maro is deciding—other councillors and nobles have their influence—he

alone is not heard, or, if he gain a hearing, has no courage with which to maintain his opinion. Sold to stronger evil ! he is only too well known as one whose ambition can be bribed easily, as one bound hand and foot and reduced to helplessness by the greater power of the Governor of Neridah. And so—though sensible of the peril of the land, of the fatal course upon which all minds are bent, though writhing with the stings of injured vanity, he has no strength to take decided action. What is left to him ? He has no influence—his bride, the bride he once hoped to win, is *dead*—her father, to whom he once refused assistance, has been released, but by Maro, not himself. And now the whole country turns towards the Rema, and he dares not uplift his voice against their will ; dares not, lest Maro, whom he dreads, detests, obeys, should take away from him the little that remains. Wandering through his palace with tormented steps, he sees before him the destruction that he fears.

What shall we say of him ? Ascar, in his dungeon, has the wisdom of suffering, and a sweet bride in his arms ; Alvo, in ruin, has men who fight for him, who count their lives valuable for his sake, not their own ; Olbri is honoured in death, and in final, hard-won triumph, is laid to rest in the earth of the Fair Country. But this poor Estri. . . .

Ah ! let us leave his palace ; the free air is better than these heavy perfumes, though it breathe at

this moment upon messengers who hasten towards their land's greatest enemy. For the Fair Country, which has received ambassadors from Alvo, has also been receiving other overtures ; and, delirious with terror at the loss of the Nira camp, the Fair Country has come to a decision. Unhindered by the few, faint, gentle protests with which Estri Envar has sought to delay its action, the Council has issued its mandate, and urgent messengers are already upon their way to Ursan's camp. Already strange rumours of a possible alliance have pierced to the Rema, to the Leopard's Den ; whilst Ursan lingers in his camp by the Tordrade, for the Leopard is quiet till the moment comes to spring.

Two we know wait together. In their dark, silent prison, Ascar and Ered are together, side by side, in no need of light to show each the other's face, since faces and thoughts can touch even in darkness. They are speaking, but not of the conflicting rumours which sometimes reach even their captivity ; or the more certain news, arrived from Alvo's camp, which tells of an alliance lately broken. Perhaps in captivity it is possible to break some of the chains which bind men down to earth ; at any rate the young noble and his wife appear to aspire towards a wider freedom. They whisper together of the country of the Gods, of faith, love, inviolable ties ; they ask each other whether there can be a land where those who die meet again with re-

cognition. Now and then they whisper memories—Ascar tells of a young comrade, or Ered of her wanderings with Naritah ; but even these memories turn their thoughts again to dreams of an unknown and higher life. They confess old mistakes, make steadfast resolutions ; they promise that each will strive to help the other—now and then their lips meet, for we are rarely so sublime as to be entirely above all human consolation. Do these need freedom? . . .

Leaving them together in their prison, to teach each other the lessons of the darkness ; seeking the more complicated life of sunshine, we will enter Ursan's camp with the messengers. Our legend draws to its close, and this may be almost the last time that we shall stand within sound of the Varidi. In what manner will the man whom Alvo has called father greet the ambassadors from the Fair Country?

Ursan received the deputation in his tent. Apparently the Maravel attached importance to it, for in the arrangements for its reception there was unusual state. The leader, as usual, sat on his bales of goods, but these were concealed by purple coverings, so that they formed something like a shapeless throne, upon which he reclined, robed in red, with crown and sceptre. Behind him were three of his leaders—the misshapen form of Corlon, the low forehead and narrow eyes of Rudol,

the slim figure of Iscar, whose gaze, cold, inscrutable, was fixed steadily upon the deputation. An ominous group ! which could be dimly seen behind the barbaric throne of the Maravel—who only raised himself by the slightest movement to acknowledge the entrance of the messengers. They entered, knelt ; they laid at the feet of Ursan the jewels which had been his pledges of safe-conduct. For the first time the rulers of the Alidrah were at the feet of the Maravel of the Rema.

They had not, however, entirely lost their pride. Their bearing was formal, if not arrogant ; they were clad in the uneasy manners of those who would ask a favour, but are determined not to ask with humility. And withal, in spite of the yoke of patriotism, enforced courtesy, fear and insolence, there was visible in them a curiosity to see the enemy of whom they had heard so much. On his part, Ursan, reclining on his throne, looked down upon them with indifferent eyes. What did it concern the mighty Maravel if he received messengers from the Fair Country ?

Maro took the word.

‘ Maravel, we have come to thee in consequence of the last news from the Nira, in consequence also of thy gracious message, and of another message to which we have not replied. We have learned that, since the battle with the Nira, the leader Alvo increases every day in strength, and thy gracious-

ness has encouraged us to hope that thou wilt assist us against a common enemy. We hear that the mountain tribes are supplying him with soldiers, that his camp is already strongly fortified ; we feel that it is needful to take immediate steps to root out from earth this universal pest. I lay at thy feet the message he has sent, which our hearts feel to be lying, treacherous. We have decided. The Fair Country will not rest till the leader Alvo lies dead before its eyes. Thou mayest be certain that nothing less than such a hope would bring its rulers to the Maravel of the Rema.'

As he ended, he knelt, and during the instant that he knelt, the eyes of the Maravel and Maromet—the pale eyes of Ursan, too indifferent to be scornful, bearing down the dark glance of the Governor of Neridah. Secure in his strength, his unscrupulous ambition, in his imperiousness, his power over men, the Governor of Neridah was not prepared for this consciousness of force that could overwhelm his own. His dark face was pale as he rose to his feet ; but Ursan, without heeding him, took the message in his hand.

' Ah ! from Alvo ! ' he murmured, his harmonious voice touched with some feeling which remained inscrutable ; and with lingering movements, as if in no need of haste, he opened the message, and his glance fell upon it. He closed it ; his eyes looked out into the distance, sombre with thought

and drawn beneath his brows ; he laid it down, and with his previous royal indifference turned his attention to the deputation. With many sensations, of which fear rose the highest, the ambassadors gazed at the grey-haired Maravel.

‘Ah! little Alvo!’ Ursan murmured softly ; ‘and so he would make of himself a sacrifice—he would choose his own altar, and offer his own blood, that he may join his young comrade in the shades! And you—you are to grant a full forgiveness to this band of exiles who have followed him, that he may gain in this moment of defeat the benefit for which he has always been contending. Why not give the rest, forego the sacrifice, and offer him the crown of the Alidrah? . . . But I forget, you tell me that you come to compass the death of the Wizard and his men. Can I assist you? I promise candidly that the old Maravel will help you if he can.’

‘Dost thou will his death, Maravel?’ cried a governor (not Maro, who remained with bent head, lost in thought).

And Ursan turned his old face towards the speaker, slowly, and with a look as if he listened. His words came slowly,—

‘Ay, truly, I desire his death.’

‘Then—’ cried the Governor, starting to his feet.

But Ursan raised a finger, and there was silence in the tent. Through that silence, breathless with

fate, surcharged with doom, came slowly the low voice of the Maravel.

‘I have vowed that neither I nor any Rema in my armies shall lay even a finger-tip on the young leader. *Yet—*’

Mechanically the deputation rose. But Ursan was motionless, looking out into the distance; perchance for a moment there rose before his eyes a young face, beautiful as an image of the Gods. Then, with outspread arms and a sweet smile on his lips, he signed to the ambassadors to come near him. They crowded on the throne; and with bent, clustered heads, listened to the whisper of the Maravel.

That night, when the deputation had departed, when stars shone over the Tordrade and Varidi, another embassy sought the Maravel of the Rema. Ursan came out to receive it, standing in state before his tent, with his leaders round him, a royal spectacle; and the representatives of the Country of the Rema knelt down before him, and made supplication. They came to ask for themselves and their Rema countrymen, that the Maravel would appease their anxiety for the future, and in the gracious kindness he had always shown, would choose some man whom he might train to be son and heir. Did Ursan hear them? To the amazement of them all, he stood before them with blank

eyes, rigid mouth, a face that might have been that of an old man's dotage, save for the grasp with which his lips held each other. All at once it quivered, gave way ; it seemed to break from end to end, as banks break before a tide too strong.

'I will have no son.'

He crushed his face into his hands, and rushed with violent motion to his tent. The Rema stood breathless, as if at an end of all existence ; yet, when Rudol at length dared to seek the Maravel, he found him writing, was greeted with the usual smile, and offered the usual tidings of the day. Neither he, however, nor any other man dared refer again to the message from the Rema.

And, meanwhile, the embassy to Ursan's tent found its way once more to the Fair Country.

XXII.

Thou would'st not think how ill all's here about my heart ; but it is no matter. . . . If it be now, 'tis not to come ; if it be not to come, it will be now ; if it be not now, yet it will come ; the readiness is all. . . . Let be.

MEANWHILE also—enclosed on all sides with marshes, white with winter, with leaden skies over them and iron earth beneath them, Alvo and his army lived in the Nira camp. It would be difficult to paint a position more desolate, for they were in perpetual danger of starvation, and were more than once compelled to kill their horses. They could not move, for sickness broke out amongst them ; and moreover, their numbers were at best so insignificant that it would have been madness to leave a fortified camp, and expose themselves as a prey to the Nira armies. The continual success which alarmed the Fair Country amounted, when weighed, to little more than this—that a few of the border tribes had sent some soldiers, and that the country people were not ill-disposed ; these last, indeed,

fearing the leader as a magician, and bringing timid offerings of dried fruit and other food. It will be seen that Alvo had little cause for exultation, in spite of the undoubted triumph he had won, that his present existence was as full of difficulty as the one he had endured in his former camp. Yet the singular qualities with which he was gifted had never been more vividly displayed; and in spite of the hardships which all endured, the devotion of the army remained unchangeable. It is pleasant to dwell on the thought of Alvo in those days, which he felt to be forerunners of the end, for, wasted with hardship and starvation as he was, the flame that was in him had never burned so clearly. He went about the army, comforting the sick, sharing the scanty meals of starving soldiers, a presence which men desired, for which they longed, as for something of superhuman attributes. No man could be dull, or lost in thought when he was near, for he was possessed with the most wayward gaiety, jesting with the soldiers as he taught them exercises, or in moments of leisure playing games with them. In this hard-beset army—more happy than of old—there was no need of rigour, or punishment, since all loved Alvo, and for the sake of their devotion, endured hunger and wretchedness with him. Nay! they even had hopes, when the cruel winter was over, the border tribes would join them, and they would cross the marshes to success.

Osmyn alone remained always grim and silent, though he laboured assiduously, as he had always done. He had no time, however, to give his master personal service, and left that office to Alvo's latest shield-bearer.

This attendant was Lipsus—become as familiar a presence in the Nira camp as he had been in that of the Rema, brown-faced Lipsus, always suspected by the Exiles, and not too much favoured by the Border-tribes. What did Lipsus think of these days of want and hunger, these iron skies, this white earth, lonely camp, this life for which he had given up his country, and the service once vowed to the old Marvel? Without complaining, he went about the camp, obedient to Alvo's bidding, hugging his hatchet as of old—sometimes, indeed, clutching it so closely to him that he must have felt in want of companionship. It was a strange sight to see the Marvel and Lipsus ; Alvo, wayward, gentle, with thin face, burning eyes ; and Lipsus keeping close to the Marvel, and gazing on him in bewilderment. This leader of changing moods, of gracious temper, with his variations from sadness to gaiety, his childish grimaces over horse-flesh or black bread, was indeed a perplexity to the Rema soldier. One day when Alvo had come into his tent, still full of the excitement with which he had cheered his army, and had flung himself on his mattress, propping his head upon his hand,

whilst his eyelashes drooped on his brown, sparkling eyes, he became aware that Lipsus had come near him, and was looking down on him in solemn doubt. The words of the Rëma fell with gravity, almost as if they were a question fraught with doom.

‘Marvel . . . art thou mortal?’

Alvo started in amazement, and his hand struck against a sharp piece of wood—one of those wedges, keen almost as a weapon, which were used for fastening tent-curtains to the ground. The sudden pain forced a cry, his whole face became convulsed; and Lipsus, still looking down, saw the slight hurt that was done. It was not in the nature, the assurance of a Rëma, to let such an incident pass without remark.

‘That is nothing, Marvel!’

His contempt was evident, and for one instant hot blood burned Alvo’s face. Then, controlling himself, with his accustomed playfulness he said, smiling,—

‘The Marvel is mortal!’

It was evening; and the sound of the evening call reminded Lipsus of duties in the camp. He retreated in silence, apparently more bewildered, more perplexed by his problem than he had been before. Osmyn, entering to receive his evening orders, was surprised at the sombre mood of the Marvel.

‘Thou are tired, Estri?’

Alvo did not answer at once. He still lay on his mattress, with his face propped on his hand. For the first time that face showed the weariness, the anxiety, hunger, in which he had lately lived. But his voice came quietly, although his eyes, open, fixed, sought the distance, as if to pierce futurity.

‘I am thinking, Osmyn, that they gave me a wise name, who in their folly called me the young leader.’ And, as Osmyn in distress bent over him, he repeated,—

‘The young leader! I shall be only the young leader.’

No more words passed. Alvo quickly roused himself and gave attention to the business of the camp; nor was his mind in the least degree less clear, or his directions less practical than usual. Yet Osmyn went out from his young master’s tent with a leaden weight on his heart and his grim brows; whilst the leader, left alone, covered his face with both his hands, and had the courage to face his life at last. What should he do? His strength failed rapidly, and he knew not how much longer he could count upon it. He had received no answer from Exiles or Fair Country, and in the distance lurked the old Marvel. What hope was left? Not even, as it seemed, the desperate hope that his sacrifice would be accepted—the

offer, twice made, to purchase with his blood the lives of the soldiers who followed him. Long, long he lay there with hands clenched beneath his face, absorbed in a dumb entreaty to the Gods; then rose up quietly, and went out into the camp that the soldiers might be encouraged by his presence. For, under whatever overwhelming weight he laboured of spiritual dread or physical exhaustion, he would not give way or let others be discouraged, he would fight out the battle to the end. Perhaps, at this last hour, the Gods might pity him, and save those lives for which he strove in vain.

Did the Gods hear him? On that very night came changes so swift as to seem miraculous—the snow melted, the spring rushed with a bound, and with the blue morning sky arrived two messages: the first an overture from a border tribe, the other an embassy from the Alidrah. Miraculous! that the young leader, *the young leader!* should be exchanging courtesies with the Fair Country. Ah, was it possible, after so much had chanced, that the Exiles would really see their land again?

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We come thus to the end, to the supreme, closing moments in the changing drama of the young leader's life; to the last gleam, with a glory of its own, like a red sun sinking on a winter's landscape. The new information spread like fire through the

camp—the band of Exiles would once more see their country!

But not enter it! The message from the Alidrah, though courteous, though glancing at future benefits, referred only to a peaceful conference to be held on the borders of the Fair Country. On one side, they demanded that Alvo should bring with him no greater army than his ninety followers; on the other hand, they bound themselves by the most solemn pledge to receive peacefully the leader and his followers. This pledge was not expressed either in writing or in words; it was sealed in a manner more dread, unchangeable—a manner of which the camp spoke with bated breath, since even the rudest felt its awfulness. There was handed to Alvo, wrapped in coverings, inscribed with mystic figures and the names of many Gods, the blood-red stone which for untold generations had been the most sacred pledge of the Fair Country. It lay there, the stone on which were mystic lines, dimly portraying the image of a God—lines which no Estri or priest, however hardened, would dare to copy or attempt to imitate. Kneeling men presented it; and Alvo, as he touched it, felt a thrill which he was not able to conceal. It lay in his hand, the irrevocable pledge of the good faith, the good will of the Alidrah.

By this supreme means it was proved beyond a

doubt that the rulers of the Fair Country were sincere, that in their alarm at the neighbourhood of Ursan they were turning to the leader who was Ursan's enemy. Their message spoke much of danger from the Rema, and their desire to confer with the leader of the Exiles; though of his own proposal not a single word was written, save a suggestion that his letter should be read in conference. The prevailing opinion amongst the Nira and the Ninety was that the Estria needed a Marvel, and that they wished to oppose to the skill of Ursan the fame of a leader of supernatural distinction. It was much that an embassy should have been sent; all might he hoped now this first step had been taken.

And so—whilst the spring sun shone, and the wide extent of marshes blossomed with flowers, pink, red, blue, and yellow, whilst reeds waved to spring winds, and beneath a changing sky great surfaces of water glistened into ripples, whilst all spoke of hope, and each day brought to life some new brilliant beauty, either of leaf or flower—the camp of Alvo, with stir and agitation, prepared for a change that might be a final one. It was not, indeed, the intention of the leader to abandon the camp that had been so hardly won; he intended to leave in it the forces of the Nira after sending a message to the other friendly tribes. But the change in the attitude of the Alidrah must involve

other changes in its train ; and therefore, with all the gladness of new visions there mingled something of the soberness of parting. Through every hardship, every rigour of the winter, the army had maintained the most steadfast faithfulness ; and now that at last its sufferings were over, there were some who looked back even to those iron times. But the Nira trusted Alvo, for they knew that he would not forget men who had fought for him.

And Alvo ? Through the many preparations of those days he was compelled to incessant activity ; but his inward feeling, belying outward action, gave his utmost activity the aspect of soberness. He was no longer excited, feverish ; he was pale, quiet, absorbed in many duties—no man could possibly have divined from his appearance that the dream of a life was at last brought close to him. On the evening before his departure from the camp, he sent suddenly for Lipsus, whom he had not lately seen ; and the Rema found him standing in his tent amidst the disorder of preparation for a journey. Without once looking at his companion, Alvo muttered a few words in low, hurried tones. He had decided not to take his shield-bearer ; he would leave him to remain with the Nira in the camp.

Lipsus stood in dismay.

‘It is not that I do not need thee !’ Alvo cried, with his usual dread of giving pain. ‘But I fear—I fear—’

His voice broke suddenly. He spoke again, still without looking at the soldier.

‘If there should be danger . . . it would comfort me to know that one of my followers was safe. I promise thee that if all goes well with us I will send for thee instantly, and keep thee near me. Thou art one of the Ninety, and there is not one of them who shall be more honoured than thou in our success.’

‘Yes, Maravel,’ said Lipsus, ‘to share the honour of success when I have not been at thy side in time of danger; to be sent away from thee when thou hast any fear, and brought back afterwards as a toy for thee to play with. I am not one of thine!’

He turned away his face, for tears that he could not repress rushed to his eyes. Alvo was silent. At length, when some time had passed, he touched the Rema, muttering,—

‘Then stay with me.’

He seemed anxious, distressed, but he said nothing more; and Lipsus, having gained permission, was content.

The next day all the last preparations were completed; and, when the sun was sinking towards evening, the border tribes were ranged in order of battle, and Alvo stood before them to say farewell. For once, however, the ready tongue was silent—he stood looking on them, but he did not speak;

until, at last, he gave a friendly sign, and turned away without uttering a word. Years afterwards those men told their children of the evening when they looked for the last time on the face of the young leader.

They remained in the camp, whilst in the marshes round them the marsh-flowers bloomed into the brilliancy of spring, telling each other that they would hear of Alvo before the White Time passed in the Fair Country. The White Time came, advanced, but brought no tidings of those who had gone from them into the distance. At length . . . but before the border tribes can hear, we will behold the last scene of the drama for ourselves.

XXIII.

Clasp hands beneath the silent night
That hushes all these mortal jars.

THE last scene! Rocks! rocks on every side of us, the rocks on the north-eastern border of the Alidrah, almost concealing from view the narrow valley which winds its way through them to the flowers of the Fair Country. And this one—this—is the Rock of Conference, lying low amongst the others, as if cut short in its growth, and dark with shadows which, as the evening falls, are cast upon it from the higher rocks. Some of Alvo's soldiers have climbed amongst those peaks, anxious to gain a lofty point of vision; and a few have been able to see the distant Escola, the great plain like the sea, the blue lines of the Fair Country. But as the sunset dyes rocks and plain with crimson, the evening recall has brought them to the camp; for, wherever Alvo may be, be it only for a night, there is always the appearance of a camp and order. They have come back wild with dreams,

for their feet are on the border, the weary journey is at an end at last, to-morrow they will receive the Estria, and, before another day, they may stand in the Fair Country. All is possible now. . . . But who is this messenger who has stolen with darkening night into the camp—this woman with a wild face and streaming hair, the dark features of a Rema, and a Rema knife against her breast. By the red light of the torches, which have only just been lit, she stands before Alvo and his followers, her arm raised in warning or in threatening, whilst her voice pours out the wild tones of prophecy. As she speaks a deep silence falls upon the soldiers—breathless, intense, as the silence of the grave. Alvo listens, with pale face and steady eyes, as one who dreams rather than one who is awaked.

‘You are betrayed, Marvel! Every pass in these mountains is secured, your enemies are here in overwhelming multitudes; they have enticed you to this place that they may kill you, that you and your followers may have no escape from death! I am Naritah, a Rema, your soldier Uldic’s wife, I have come to see my husband once more before the battle; they allowed me to pass because they are convinced that you and your soldiers have no chance of escape. Did you trust in their charm? It is a Rema cheat, it has been the treasure of our old Marvel.’

She would have said more, but Alvo interrupts,

in the piercing voice of one who cries with exultation.

‘Ah, the old Maravel ! At last I have news of him ! He is always so wise, my brother Maravel !’

The words, which have the sound of a wild laugh, die away, and there is uttermost silence in the camp. The soldiers draw near each other ; through the darkness of the night they begin to be aware of the darker night of death.

‘So,’ says Alvo, gently, ‘we have little time to waste if, as thou sayest, we shall be attacked before the morning. Come apart with me, and when I have talked with thee, then go to thy husband and say the last farewell. And then—leave the camp, for I will not have it said that there was a woman hurt in my last battle. Come close to me, men. There are orders I must give, for at such a time we must all help each other !’

. . . Whispering in the darkness—

‘I must part with thee,’ mutters Uldic. ‘It will be easy for thee to find another husband. And for me—I would rather die in battle with the Estri than from the javelins of the Rema, with bound hands, as Ivlon did. Let us kiss each other. I release thee from thy pledges.’

They kiss in the darkness, without tears or lamentations, and little Naritah steals away into the night.

And now—by torchlight, for the night is black

and deep—all last preparations are set hastily on foot, ramparts are thrown up, weapons are examined, sentinels are posted to keep watch through the night. Some of the soldiers, who have volunteered, have stolen away towards the mountain passes ; all are sober, cheerful, each intent on his own duties, each working with the others in close companionship. Alvo moves among them, pointing out with smiling eyes the natural defences in which the place abounds ; giving each man his tasks, delighted with their ardour, keen and bright as usual in prospect of a battle. His spirit moves all ; and even when the spies return and mutter that enemies are to be found on every side, the certainty of adversaries in overwhelming numbers seems to move the Exiles rather to triumph than to fear. Let them come with the morning ! as soon as they have come they shall find out that we are not afraid. They have betrayed us, but they shall learn from us that we do not fear death when we can die together ! And now, all the last preparations being completed, the camp contentedly settles down to sleep. Sentinels watch ; the rest lie on the ground, each man fully armed, with weapons at his side. A few torches shine. Let us take rest while we can, for after dawn there will be no time for rest. Osmyn has spread a mantle for the Estri ; he shall sleep safely in the midst of us !

‘Osmyn,’ whispers Alvo ; and, as the gaunt

silent soldier bends over the couch on which he has laid his master, the young leader raises himself, and with a grasp as firm as steel clasps, with both hands, the arm of his follower. The torchlight reflects itself in his shining eyes.

‘I hope to be thy servant in the country of the Gods—only the Gods will not be so merciful, they know that I do not deserve so good a master. Go and sleep, Osmyn.’

He raises himself still more, his arms clasp the soldier’s neck, and he kisses him. As they fall Osmyn turns away without a word, obedient to the command of his master to the end.

And now Alvo’s head sinks. Through his closed, weary eyelids he can still see the red glow of the torch, can still hear faint sounds of voices and movements, the rush of the wind, the cry of some animal. But he is resting. . . . What is this in front of him? The tuft of grass towards which he has long been striving. To-day he will reach it, he will force himself to courage, will try to forget that he is afraid of falling. Ah! it is good to be out upon the rocks, in the midst of the free air, and the sunshine of the Gods. . . . the golden ball of the sun hangs over him, not far from him is the dream of the Fair Country . . . His eyes open. Where is he? In the silent camp—the soldiers are resting near him on the ground. Ah! this is the end— He turns upon

his side, and his tired eyelids close to deeper sleep. In the midst of his soldiers, of the men who love him, he will take his last rest before the morning comes. They are close to him . . . yellow-haired Ivlon is not far . . . he lets his head fall upon his couch, and sleeps . . .

So comes the morning. Ere the first ray of the sun the rocks are echoing to the tread of multitudes, wild instruments blow, standards wave through the gloom, on every side troops are advancing to their prey. Behind the defences, which last night prepared, stand the Exiles, resolute, with weapons in their hands, certain of death, but glad as men can be of the battle which is to be the road to death. Through the morning gloom it is scarcely possible to behold the pass through the rocks to the Fair Country. What does that matter? Even if our dream is vain we will sell our lives dearly. They have come! This is the end . . .

X X I V.

Where the sun-blaze never scorches ; where the
star-beams cease to chill ;
Where no tempest stirs the echoes of the wood or
wave or hill ; . . .
Where no shadow shall bewilder ; where life's vain
parade is o'er ;
Where the sleep of sin is broken, and the dreamer
dreams no more.

Is this the end ? Night has sunk upon the rocks ;
stars shine upon still faces upturned to the sky ;
there is a glare of torches ; a noise of many voices ;
a confusion of many movements to and fro. One
scene is quiet—within a great charred circle,
strangely made by burning grass upon the rock,
a dark figure sits, with bent head, motionless,
clasping something, more dark, more shapeless, in
its arms. Round it move the torches, the feverish
incessant motion testifying to the unresting ex-
citement of the day. But within the charmed circle
each foot fears to tread, and Lipsus remains there
alone, with the young leader in his arms. A torch
that is fastened to a stake behind him casts a red,

wavering light upon the scene. But his head is bent over the burden on his breast, save when he raises it to stare at the dark sky and the stars. Perhaps he does not care to look down upon the ground, and see the dead faces of his companions. What does Lipsus, supporting the young leader on his knees, remember of the supreme struggle of the day?

Ah! remembrance is confused, for it is hard to think with the low, moaning breath of Alvo in his ears, with torches moving like haunting spirits round him, with a head bewildered by dizziness and pain. Thoughts will not come, or, if they come, come all together—he is once more raising his head from heaps of slain—at the same instant fighting by the side of Alvo—or falling himself as he sees his master fall. What saved him, what instinct made him cry that he was a Rema, diverting the weapon that had been raised above his head—not the love of life, surely; rather the wish for some delay, that he might at least learn the fate of the Maravel? And delay has been granted—and he has the privilege of spending this one last night with the young leader. Ah! do not the Exiles—the Exiles who are dead—envy him who is holding the leader in his arms?

Alvo moves; and, at once, with the instinct of a mother, Lipsus bends down to soothe and comfort him, scarcely noticing that he is bending to a face

so altered that it is barely within recognition. Ah! is this—*this*—this crushed, burned, writhing heap really all that is left of the ambitious leader, all that remains after the experiences by which his sorceries have been tried to-night? Lipsus shudders to think of the moments during which he stood awestruck, silent, whilst dark forms bent over a figure on the ground, a figure from which came neither cry nor groan, though its eyes, so they said, were wild with delirious terror. And now, they have spared him, yes, spared him till the morning, that he may be offered *alive* to the Great Spirit; and, lest the last faint sparks of life should be consumed, they have delivered him to the keeping of the Rema. Lipsus barely remembers the solemn, awful oaths by which he has promised not to kill his master. He does not wish to kill him, he has only the most foolish yearning to hold the Maravel for the last time in his arms. Alvo's mother, if she had lived to know her son, might not have recognised him in that instant, but, as tenderly as a mother could touch a wounded child, Lipsus has gathered the crushed form on his breast. Let come now what will, let the morning come again, let the enemies come with their devil's cruelty, one thing is certain, whatever they may do, the Maravel lies in a friend's arms to-night. And oh! it is not possible, after all that has been done, that the morning can leave much power for suffering.

The torches flicker. Suddenly Alvo lifts his head. He starts up with his dark, wild eyes fixed on Lipsus; nay, as one who sees dimly through some blinding flame, he seems to recognise him through delirium. He is speaking—muttering that they must be kept away, that he cannot bear it if they touch him again.

‘The Rema know I am a coward. They always said I was a coward.’

His voice dies away into broken mutterings. Lipsus bends down to him, touches hair and forehead, caresses him with his fingers, with his lips, on his face the mother’s smile of unspeakable compassion, the expression at once of compassion and despair. Worn out by pain, Alvo sleeps, or seems to sleep, for his feverish breathing at last comes quietly. Lipsus bends over him. Within the circle of burned grass they are left alone to wear out the night together. Torches shine round them, voices fill the air, but these are left as if they were in solitude.

The night wears onward. Now and then, outside the circle, come curious faces to peer at their enemies; but these become fewer as the night advances, and, at length, they seem to be entirely alone. It is at this time that Lipsus, looking downward, meets unexpectedly his companion’s eyes, not delirious now, but fixed on him in

scrutiny, and, as it seems, trying hard to understand. So sensible, full of inquiry is the gaze, that the Rema feels his heart beat and pulses throb. He understands, before any word is uttered, the question that rises on his companion's lips. What can he do? In this time of utter darkness, he has no words with which to veil the truth.

‘Are the others dead, Lipsus?’

‘They are all dead, Maravel.’

‘All dead? Osmyn dead?’

‘They are all dead, Maravel.’

‘And thou—art thou wounded?’

‘I was only stunned.’

‘Not hurt—not injured?’

‘I am not injured, Maravel.’

Alvo does not answer, but from his expression it appears that he is collecting all his strength. It seems as if he were putting on himself the utmost force to keep himself for an instant from delirium. Crushed as he is, he lifts himself a little, with his eyes fixed steadily upon the Rema, the dark eyes which, in his distorted face, are the only features which can be recognised. His voice comes steadily, the superhuman effort for that one instant preserving his consciousness. And Lipsus, startled, has not any strength within him with which to resist the leader's last command.

‘Lipsus, go to the Maravel—the old Maravel. Tell him that thou hast come to be his soldier.

Say thou didst renounce thy faith to the young leader; the young leader was a fool who led his men to death. Tell me . . . promise me . . .'

His voice dies off into moans, and then into a delirious chatter of which no word can be distinguished. Unbound by the promise which he has not uttered, Lipsus looks down on him without a word.

And still the night wears. And to the mind of the Rema soldier there now comes vividly the trial of the morning—the Ordeal by Fire, by which a wizard who is condemned is offered to the Gods, a living sacrifice. Will not Alvo die? He has been injured, mutilated, he is in the very extremity of fever, and still the vitality, which has always burned in him, struggles in the weak body and will not let it rest and die. Over and over again it seems to Lipsus as if he were struggling back to consciousness, to be snatched again to fever or prostration, but never to the great final change of death. Surely he must die! The clouds are breaking fast. Already the east is grey and pale with morning. Alvo has fought many battles in his life, but none so needless, so desperate as this!

And now—comes the morning! The sky is flushed with colours. Through a break in the hills can be seen the rising sun. Men are moving round

them. Held by horror, agony, Lipsus feels as if all his blood were cold. Suddenly Alvo starts. His eyes, large and bright again, become fixed on the sunrise between the hills. They seem flooded with light, and that brightness and dilation restores an instant's beauty to his face. He looks at Lipsus. It seems as if he knew him, but dimly, as though weakness overpowered his consciousness. His voice comes feebly, as if from some distant country it struggled faintly towards his companion,—

‘Is that the morning?’

‘Yes, Maravel.’

‘Thou seest . . . we could not win . . . the Fair Country.’

His voice breaks, fails—and the Rema, looking down, becomes aware of a change in his face; light fails from his eyes, his lips seem blue and dead, his expression becomes one of intense exhaustion. Once, twice, he moves, with the motion of a child who is restless for a moment before it settles down to sleep; then his head sinks, and Lipsus, who holds his hand, turns away his own face that he may not see him die . . . The moments pass; the hand which the Rema holds is cold and rigid in his own living grasp. And still Lipsus sits, looking out on to the sunrise with blank, stupid eyes, as if life itself were dead.

.
One last word for him. Before infuriated soldiers

the little Rema is dragged to instant trial, charged with hastening, in some way, the wizard's death, or at any rate, with having been his follower. Lipsu does not answer—he stands in morning light, surrounded by soldiers, looking far away ; before his eyes always the vision of the land in which Alvo must have rejoined his followers. Beautiful as of old, surrounded by his soldiers, the wizard leader is again the Marvel. One only is wanting, the laggard of the band—now separated by some distance from his master. A yearning is on him to join Alvo in the shades before the Marvel has passed the border land. He scarcely attends to the questions and comments which assail him from every mouth, on every side.

His trial is short. He can understand the final question ; he is asked if he appeals to the Marvel of the Rema. For one instant his breath stops with dismay as he remembers the leader's parting words. For that moment he pauses—but no ! he gave no promise : with relief and joy he makes a quick sign of negation ; he is condemned to be beheaded, and hurrying, lest they should relent, he hastens to lower his doublet that his brown neck may be ready. A soldier snatches a weapon—and suddenly, with a thrill of horror, Lipsus recognises the friend of all his life ; of an instant's horror, for it at once occurs to him that his old friend has come forward to do him service at the end. He

kneels down quietly by a block of stone, after first requesting that he may say some parting words—words which fall from his lips in dry and formal fashion, as if they were an official utterance.

‘I desire to say that I, Lipsus, being a Rema, die faithful to the allegiance I vowed to the young leader.’

His head bends ; the hatchet falls, and he dies—as he has lived. Over him, at any rate, we need make no lamentation. With indifferent hands they take up the head, the body, and fling them on the pile upon which the rest are laid.

.

And now, without mourner, save little Naritah, who stands with clasped hands and white face by the dead—the pile is lighted, and from its dry grass and faggots a light smoke curls into the misty morning air. It wavers, hovers—it has the look of wandering spirits, lingering for a moment near the earth which they have loved ; then flames leap up, and the faces of the dead are hidden from view by red fire, blinding smoke. Not far away, in the Fair Country’s meadows, the morning wind stirs the white blossoms on the trees, the ‘bridal robe’ in which, said a wedding-guest, the land would deck herself that she might be ready for her bridegrooms. Ah ! if the land had known its deliverer, would the bride in this manner spread the marriage-feast ? The flames leap, roar—a fierce echo of the winds that

once raved around an interrupted wedding-night. Estri Ascar, asleep in the dungeon of the Rema, does not know that his sufferings are avenged at last.

CONCLUSION.

Νυνὶ δὲ κρείττονος ὀρέγονται.

OUR story is ended, but from the finished work still hang the threads that have not been gathered in ; and a few words are necessary to complete the whole. Dim pictures are rising—Estri Ascar in his prison ; Ursan in his camp, surrounded by the Rema ; the great plain, once trodden by the feet of captives ; the blossoms of the White Time in the Alidrah. Let us pause for a moment that from these mists and shadows the remaining scenes may rise slowly, one by one.

Then, first—Ursan's camp lies in a blaze of sunshine, light pouring on it, blue sky over it ; and in the very midst of this noontide splendour the Maravel is receiving a present from the Alidrah. In his state robe, which glows redly in the sunlight, with a circle of gold on his head, reclining in his royal seat, he assumes the state of a king whilst, on their knees in front of him, the messengers from the Alidrah present their gift. It is to be observed that, as coverings are unwrapped, seals are broken,

and leaders and soldiers press towards the spectacle, a certain horror that would seem irresistible thrills every face except that of the Marvel. Rema soldiers as they are, hardened to every sight, they yet fear to see the gift from the Alidrah ; for tidings have come before the messengers, and they shrink from the thought of a pale face they all know well. It is not a face, however, that becomes disclosed at last, and is raised on a spear for all the camp to see—it is a hand, yellow, stiffened, and yet to be recognised, because of the long scar which disfigures it. A supple hand once ! as all the soldiers knew in the days when it fought with them for the Marvel.

Upon the whole camp falls a deep silence.

‘So,’ murmurs Ursan, stroking his chin with his hand, ‘even a fool comes to his end at length.’

Iscar almost starts. From behind the Marvel he has been gazing intently, with fixed eyes, at the scar ; remembering, possibly (as who does not remember ?) on what occasion, and for whose sake it was gained. But he does not speak, and the messengers from the Alidrah, still on their knees, have a long tale to tell. Rudol listens with face bent forward, gloating eyes ; the desire of a life-time crowning him at last. Only he wishes that he could have been *present*, for the appetite of vengeance is insatiable.

Another voice speaks. In the tent of Ursan, dim

with evening, Iscar is standing before the Maravel—before Ursan, who, after the excitement of the day, has been barely allowed an instant for repose. His cold face agitated, and his cold eyes aflame, Iscar pours out a passionate request ; whilst Ursan, with a countenance still, immovable, looks on him with eyes as silent as his lips. His silence does not disturb his follower, possessed by the impulse that must speak or die.

‘ Maravel, let me go ! I vow by all the Gods that I will not stay any longer in thy camp. What can any man, however faithfully he serves thee, what can any soldier have to expect from thee ? I loved not the man who is dead ; and yet, though I loved him not, I was careful to pay him everything I owed ; but thou, thou didst love him, and he is the only man who has ever been able to win any love from thee ! Thou art wise, Maravel, but in spite of all thy wisdom thou hast wounded thyself this time with thine enemy. Let me go away from thee, for I am not treacherous ; if I had loved Alvo I would have died with him ! I will go to mine own lands, live there quietly, and be neither thy servant nor thine enemy.’

He has spoken ; and, in obedience to a sign from the Maravel, he salutes him, and retires, and the leader is again alone. Alone with strange thoughts ! for this is the first occasion on which one of his own leaders has deserted him.

‘ Let him go, Rudol,’ Ursan cries, with a curling lip, to the faithful spy who is soon with him in his tent ; ‘ I will send those with him who shall make it their occupation to secure him from doing any harm to us. Does he think he is Alvo?—And Alvo is dead—Rudol, I am tired, and need a little rest. Tell me the errand that has brought thee here, and then leave me alone till I summon thee.’

Rudol kneels before him.

‘ Maravel, this is from a woman who has come into the camp, closely veiled from head to foot, and whom not one of the men has dared to touch, because she has brought this ring which has been thine. She has come to ask that her husband may be spared, for he is a prisoner in the Leopard’s Den, and this is the time of year when, as thou knowest, the prisoners who are in the Leopard’s Den must die. This is the ring.’

Still on his knees before his master, he places it in the hand stretched down for it. As Ursan touches it there is a slight change in his face, only just perceptible to his follower. He makes a sign. Rudol rises and retires, and the leader for the second time is left alone ; this time with the ring, which, on a well-remembered day, he placed on the hand of one who saved his life. Who shall tell with what lingering final vision also of a beautiful face which still speaks with dumb entreaty? The ring is lying in the palm of the Maravel.

Upon it are engraved only two words. '*Ursan—Alvo.*'

It is no longer visible when Rudol enters, and the Maravel greets him with a cheerful face.

'I have decided. Send the woman from the camp with the message I have written for the Leopard's Den. Let her be treated with all possible respect as if she were a daughter or sister of my own. And, Rudol—'

He pauses, is silent for a while; and Rudol, waiting, becomes possessed with dread.

'Rudol,' mutters Ursan, in a low, an altered voice, 'the influence of a fool sometimes survives his death. There is one name, thou knowest, which, whether for good or evil, has been often used in the camp to conjure with. It is my will that it shall not be uttered any more. Tell the soldiers. Go.'

Rudol departs in fear and wonder. The command is given. From that evening by the Tor-drade, the name of Alvo is not heard in Ursan's camp.

And now . . . over Ursan's camp and Ursan's armies the mists gather thickly, and there is no more to be seen; save one dim vision of a wounded, dying leader, left to die on his way to the country of the Rema. What of the Maravel, does he not go on his way and absorb in his grasp the whole of the Fair Country? What of Rudol, does he not

prosper and still prosper, as one too vile for chastisement from Heaven? And what of the young Rema and the Karngri prince, whose friendship has blossomed in untoward times? Shall we not hope that it continues steadfast, unspoiled by the evil air of courts and camps? Of these there is little or nothing to be learned; but there is one acquaintance whom we must not forget, though the air bears no longer the faintest echo of the music to which we once listened at a wedding-feast. Like the shifting scene of some varying spectacle, the dark mist closes at length on Ursan's camp, whilst in its turn rises the barren Leopard's Rock, where Ascar and some others are being led from prison. Let us pause by the nobleman whose fortunes we have followed—the pretext for Ivlon's death and Alvo's ruin. The happy days at the Escola are over; in what manner have the Gods whispered to the Estri in the darkness?

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The prisoners are led out from prison. Last of all, at some little distance, is a tall, dark captive, who is unlike the others; closely guarded also, as if he were of more importance, surrounded on every side by Rema soldiers. He comes out slowly from the prison to the sunlight, moving with the languor of long captivity, but with eyes that survey quietly the scene around him, without any appearance of fear or agitation. There is the same quiet expres-

sion in his eyes as he leans against a rock whilst the prisoners' hands are bound, waiting for his turn, which will be the last. Suddenly he looks down. A child, a little creature, whose father, no doubt, may be found among the soldiers, has toddled close to him with uncertain steps, and supports itself on its feet against his knees. A quiet smile rises on the prisoner's face, but at the same time his eyes become more wistful; no doubt he is thinking of another child, an unborn child whom he will not live to see. A yearning is on him to touch the little creature; he looks with a doubtful glance towards the soldiers, and as they are watching him without opposition, he raises the small, soft thing into his arms. His voice comes quietly; and the soldiers, interested, draw closer to him that they may hear his words. Already it is time that his hands should be bound, but they allow him a moment with the child.

'Little one,' said Ascar, 'my feet are bound, and yours are free; and you will go away and play, whilst I must die. It is for this reason I want to tell you something of which the soldiers may remind you afterwards. I wish to tell you that there is a greater freedom, which can belong to men whether they are free or bound, alive or dead. Some day you may learn this lesson for yourself; and then you will say, "A prisoner told me so."'

He presses kisses on the soft face, the soft curls,

then sets the little thing down upon the ground ; and, smiling gravely in excuse for his delay, stretches out both his hands towards the soldiers. They are bound, and he turns without any hesitation towards the long line which has already started ; but, even as he does so, a hand upon his shoulder intimates that he is not to follow it. Last night came an order from the Marvel ; he is to be taken back again to the Leopard's Den.

Is Ascar relieved ? His face is pale and burdened, as if overweighted with some load of care ; there is none of the quick exultation on his features with which eager youth should greet return to life. Once more he sees a dark wood, the light of torches, many prisoners, all to be slain except himself ; once more he is marching with two companions, who are both dead now, although he—he is alive. Oh ! to what purpose is his worthless life spared for the *third* time when so many die ? . . . But as he raises his eyes sudden light darts into them, and in an instant Ered's arms are round his neck. As they cling to each other in that supreme reunion the Estri realises that it is good to live.

'Ascar,' whispers Ered, when they are alone that evening, clinging to each other like children who have been parted, 'I know not whether, if I had been allowed to do so, I should have dared to tell thee I was going to the Marvel. And yet it is strange that I felt no fear at all—the support of

the Gods seemed round me on every side ; I felt such faith in them as I never knew in those days when I dreamed of the wood-spirits and water-spirits. And so even I can believe ! . . . Ascar, I have another thought. I have been thinking that, when we come to the country of the Gods, it will be well for us that we shall all be spirits, and that we shall not recognise each other by our faces. For if we could say, " This one has been a Rema," " This one a Karngri," " This one from the Alidrah," all the old memories would return to us, and we should have the old bitterness again. Dost thou think as I do ?'

'No—no—' Ascar whispers, caressing the fair head lying on his shoulder, 'I am weaker or stronger, for I shall never wish to give to forgetfulness this year's memories. If I could have my will in the country of the Gods I would have Ivlon near me, with his yellow hair ; and Olbri with the pale face I used to know ; and Ered, as lovely as she always was. What shall we care then for forgotten bitterness ? In that great land we shall all be countrymen. We will not be divided there as we are here. There will be no exiles, no captives. Every man will have his country.'

Once more the mist rises. Let it mercifully cover the subsequent history of the Alidrah, of the land which gave itself over to destruction for want

of the vision which might have seen its deliverer. Like Ascar, like Alvo, like each individual soul, the Fair Country also had its hour of choice ; and the mistaken decision of a nation is an error for which multitudes pay the penalty. Ill-helped by such men as Envar and Maro, overswept by the Rema, a prey to mountain tribes—it had no might to resist the power of Ursa, and was torn to pieces, blotted out from among the nations. In the general destruction of Estria and governors, only two escaped from the universal doom, both, possibly, from an unspoken, secret reason which could influence even the relentless Marvel. The banished governor of Neridah and his three surviving daughters were permitted to live quietly in the country of the Nira ; and to Estri Ascar, at last released from prison, was assigned some land in the south of the Fair Country. Here the Estri lived, and, as years went slowly onward, his possessions became a principality, the only spot in the distracted land which could be considered well governed and at peace. A grave man, always immersed in many duties, Estri Ascar seemed scarcely the fulfilment of his youth ; but his lovely Estra, and his group of merry children, supplied beauty and brightness to his home. His life had one touch of romance ; since, on a notable occasion when he was rewarded for many services, he claimed and received a certain broken weapon—

the sword of Alvo on his last battle-field. Not for Alvo's sake! although, inscribed in golden letters, there could still be read on it the name of the young leader—a name at that time almost as much forgotten as if it had been scattered with his ashes on the winds. Not of Alvo thought Ascar; there was a dearer, humbler name which could be read beneath that of the young leader; and for its sake he brought the weapon to his home, and enclosed it there in a case of burnished gold. It lay there, honoured, wrapped in costly coverings; and although the Estri seldom spoke of his reward, there were moments when there came an expression on his face which was only brought there by one remembrance. At such times he would break out abruptly into speech, although ordinarily he was grave and silent; and the guests who surrounded him would become attentive, amazed to see his mouth tremble, and his dark eyes shine. It was at these moments that Ascar approached most nearly to the passionate glow and ardour of his youth; but this older fervour seemed to have another source, as if it were kindled from some light far away. The words which he was wont to speak were various, but the general substance of them remained the same.

‘In these days,’ the Estri said, ‘it has of late become the fashion for men to deny the existence of the Gods, or, at least, to declare loudly that there

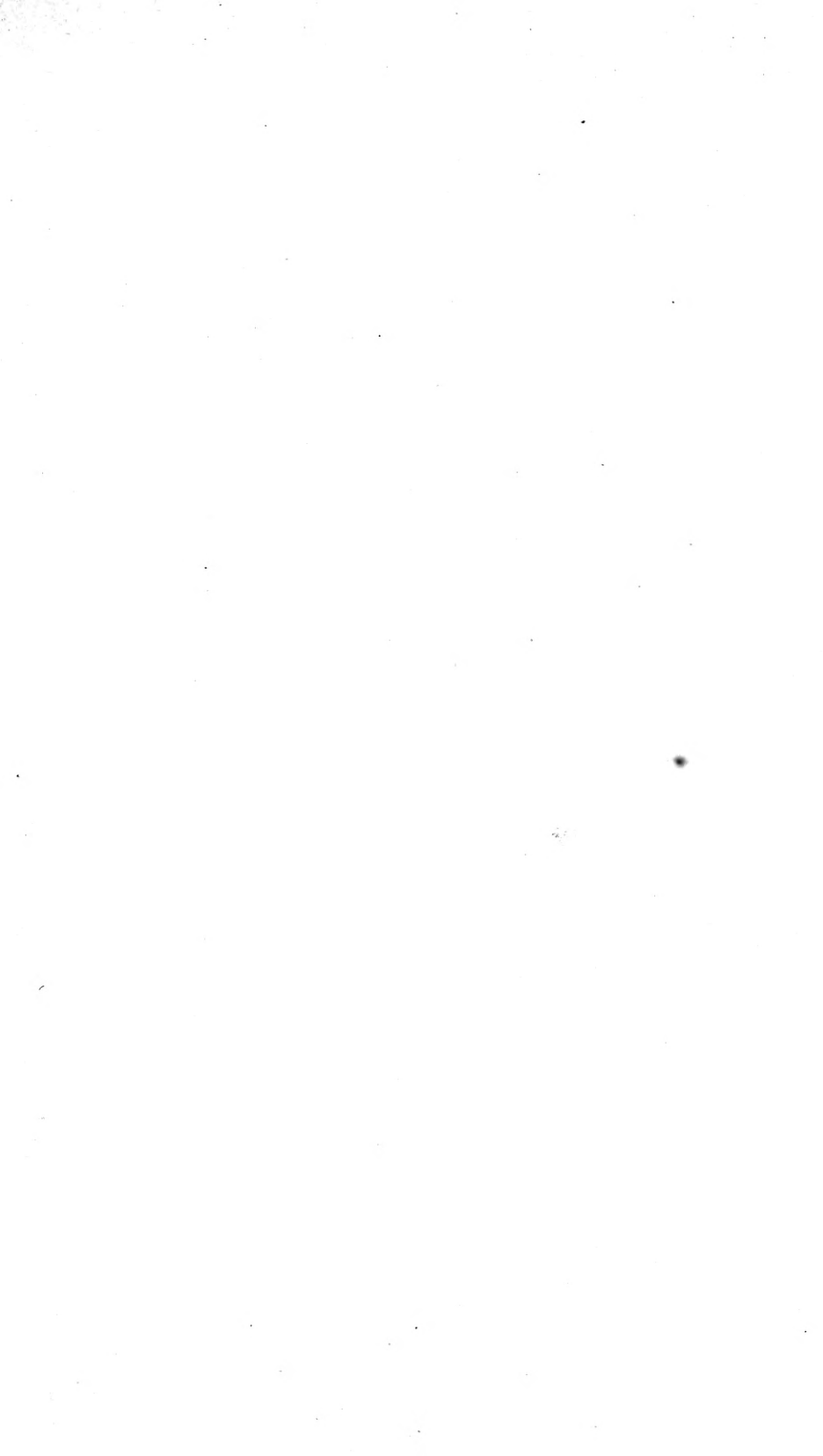
is no other country, beyond the Silence, where we may recognise each other. I can only say that we must all have known some hunted, persecuted life which has been allowed no chance of success ; or some other life, beautiful and gentle in its deeds, which has been taken from us before we could value it. It is not in my power to yield to any one the hope that such threads as these may be renewed, that nothing is absolutely lost and broken, and that we may once more be with those whom we have loved. Perchance, all the countries to which men have belonged are but shadows of some greater country far away. And now, as we pour out our wine to the Gods, let us pray that, if there is such a land, we may all be its citizens.'

Ascar spoke, and the guests looked on him without answering ; and then, turning, cast furtive glances on each other, perchance only granting the Estri the dubious credit of a man who talks learnedly on inexplicable subjects. But Ascar's children, excited and delighted, would turn to their father with fullest sympathy ; their bright, silent glances conveying, without words, that there was a memory which they shared with him. For they had not forgotten that, on a memorable evening, their father had displayed to them his dearest treasure, and had made them stand with their hands on a broken weapon whilst he told them the story

of his early life. No children could be merrier than Ascar's children, none more healthy, more devoted to the service of their land ; but each had become aware of another, wider country, from the day when its fingers touched a broken sword.

In this manner, in the land which his valour kept secure, the Estri lived with hope and memory.

THE END.





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